

Actions and reactions by Idrab

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Summary: When Billy moves to Hawkins, Indiana, he quickly climbs to the top of the school hierarchy; admired and feared by most of his peers. A few people, though, ignore him completely. And, well, Billy has never been good at being ignored. (A character study, of sorts, of Billy Hargrove and the reactions he can get out of one Steve Harrington.)

1. Nothing to Flinching

A/N: Not beta'd.

When Billy first gets to fucking Hawkins, Indiana, his first impression is that it is barely even a town. It's small, it smells like shit, and it oozes boredom. The people are boring, the school is boring, and the town is small enough that he won't be able to get away with raising hell to *tackle* the boredom, because it will eventually get back to his dad. If Neil is punishing him by moving here, he couldn't have picked a better place.

So seriously, fuck Hawkins.

California hadn't been perfect either, but it had been *home*, and he'd at least had friends – not people to braid his hair with, exactly, but people to hang with. Have fun with, mess around with; people he could feel comfortable around. He misses them. The people in this new school don't even compare.

He is angry and frustrated and fed up for the first few days, while he climbs to the top of the school hierarchy without any real resistance, and when he gets there he looks down on the people around him with a disdainful frown and thinks *Really? That easy?*

His classmates on the whole are pale and dull and stupid, and many of them are all too willing to accommodate him just because he's loud and pushy. Pathetic, the lot of them. No challenge at all.

Some people seem more interesting than others. There are girls who scowl and turn away when he smiles at them, and there are guys who meet his eyes with a silent dare. He makes a mental note about who the girls are for future reference, if he ever feels like working for it a little, and goes out of his way to let the guys know just who is in charge now. They either fold or back off when confronted; honestly, this town is so boring.

After little over a week, the bigger part of the school population go out of their way to avoid bumping into Billy in the hallways, which is

exactly how he likes it. They look at him with a mix of ill-hidden curiosity and caution, but they are always aware of him.

A few people, though, ignore him completely. And, well, Billy has never been good at being ignored.

One of those who try to pretend that Billy isn't even there, is Steve Harrington, whose place he has supposedly taken. Billy barely notices him at first, too busy placing himself on top, but when he has settled and inevitably finds himself bored out of his mind, he's starting to pay attention. To how Harrington never seeks him out, but not actively avoids him either; like he simply can't be bothered to acknowledge Billy's existence.

And it bothers him, for reasons unknown.

Like, Harrington hadn't even been the resident king when Billy got there – he had already left the position, *willingly*. Does that explain why it was so easy to just sweep in and take over? Billy can't help but contemplate how it would have been if Harrington had been there to defend his throne. It probably would have been more interesting, that's for sure. Steve's old friends has some stories to tell about him; stories that Billy honestly can't see applied to the boy with the big hair and the dark eyes. So Harrington was wild, once? A badass? Billy can't see it.

Harrington never seems to care about his old friends nowadays, or the school hierarchy, or even Billy himself. He walks through the school days like nothing can touch him, and it rubs Billy the wrong way. Because *no one* is untouchable, and *everything* is a fucking challenge.

So Billy starts challenging him, just to get a reaction out of him.

At first, it's only small things, like meeting his eyes and not looking away (Harrington always looks away first, but not like he gives up, more like he doesn't care enough to keep it up). When that won't get the results he wants, Billy steps it up – starts shoulder-checking him between classes and pushing him down when they play basketball; even if they are on the same team. A comment here, a biting remark there, and finally even the unflappable Steve Harrington starts losing

his cool.

"Fuck, man, what's your problem?!"

"No problems here, *King Steve*."

"Shut up, Hargrove, you're such an ass."

"Aw, did I hurt your feelings, Harrington?"

A huff of breath, a twitch of an eye, a clenched jaw, maybe a tensing of the shoulders – every reaction is a success. The few times when Harrington comments or pushes back are victories in Billy's book, because it's a response that he is the cause of. It gives him a sense of satisfaction to know that he has made an impact on Steve Harrington's perfect little life, however small it might be. Every reaction is a good reaction, because Billy caused it. *I did that*.

Then comes the night when everything goes to hell; the night at the Byers' house.

His nerves had been frayed all evening, after an altercation with Neil, and he had been angry and keyed-up before he even got there. And when he gets there, Steve Harrington is there, too, which – well, it's not ideal, because Billy needs to let out some steam at this point.

"Am I dreaming, or is that you, Harrington?"

"Yeah it's me. Don't cream your pants."

Well, it's a reaction at least, even though Harrington looks like he'd rather be anywhere else at the moment. Or that he wishes Billy was anywhere else. Well, Billy's wishing for the same thing, and if *he* doesn't get his wish, why the fuck should Harrington?

"What are you doing here, amigo?"

Because this is the Byers' brother's house, and judging from the rumors circling around school the older Byers actually kicked Harrington's ass last year, so what is he doing here with a bunch of kids – that he can clearly see peeking through the window – at this

time of night?

Walking closer, sizing Billy up, Harrington draws:

"I could ask you the same thing. *Amigo*."

Harrington definitely wants him gone, and it rubs Billy the wrong way. Something's off with this whole situation, but he's here to get Max so he's willing to let it slide for now. But when he asks for his step-sister and the other boy *lies to his face* while looking unapologetic and cool about it, Billy snaps. Fuck it, *no*.

He shoves Harrington to the ground and kicks him on the way inside, because he doesn't have the patience for this shit – it's been an exhausting evening and he just wants to get Max and go home. And then, when he gets inside, he sees her standing there with her pathetic little friends – next to *Sinclair*, whom Billy has warned her to stay away from.

Stupid fucking kids. *Why can't she just do as she's told?* Children. They don't know anything, they don't know how the world works.

I'll show them.

The rage is boiling under his skin, and he backs Sinclair up against a wall.

"You stay away from her. Stay away from her, you hear me?"

Sinclair is fighting to get away, and yelling for him to let him go, but he's just a kid and no match for Billy's strength. But then the little shit knees him in the groin and tears himself out of his grip. He did not expect that move, and for a second he's stunned at the audacity of this kid. When he recovers enough to stand up straight, he pins Sinclair under a murderous glare and growls:

"So dead, Sinclair! You're dead."

And maybe he would have actually attacked the kid for real, if he'd had another few moments. He'll never know, though, because suddenly Steve fucking Harrington is there, throwing the first punch – and the second.

And despite the sudden pain in his face, he laughs, because *that* was a reaction he only ever dreamt of. If he'd known he had to go through the brats to get to see the mighty King Steve in action, he would have done it long ago, because Harrington's eyes are positively flaming and it is such a thrill to see that look on his face and know that it is because of Billy.

And then, just as Billy's getting ready for a proper showdown, Harrington put two fingers to his chest and firmly pushes him back.

"Get out."

His voice is cold.

A dismissal. Unruffled, untouchable Steve Harrington, dismissing him as if what he's done doesn't matter. As if *Billy* doesn't matter.

The flames under his skin burns hot, licks his insides like a wildfire, and there is something in the back of his throat that tastes almost like embarrassment. He doesn't like it.

He will *not* be dismissed, he will *not* be ignored.

And the anger boils over and he explodes. He ignores the kids shouting, he ignores the sounds of pain Harrington makes when his punches makes impact – sounds that he would have craved in any other situation – he ignores everything but the feeling of his fists against Harrington's face. He distantly recognizes that he should stop, that he has fucked up *bad* – but he can't stop, he is so *angry*, he–

There's a sharp pain in his neck, which pulls him out of the red mist. He turns around, slowly, and hears Harrington groan on the floor behind him. There is a syringe stuck in his neck, and as he pulls it out, the world tilts.

"... the hell is this?"

Max stands in front of her friends, and they are all staring at him. He knows that whatever this is, she did it.

"You little shit, what did you do?"

The world is spinning around him and he is helpless to fight against it, so he falls. Hits the floor hard, but barely even feels it. The red mist is back, or maybe that's just Max.

Small. Redhead. Bit of a bitch.

He is suddenly a little grateful that she stopped him, because he wouldn't have stopped in time. Like this, he didn't have to make the choice to stop, to *give up*; she made the choice for him. But the fleeting feeling of gratitude is swept away and forgotten when he blinks and sees her standing over him with a bat full of nails. She's warning him to stay away from her and her friends, and he almost snorts at that. Does she think she's threatening? She's *pathetic*. He's faced down way worse than a little girl with a bat.

"Screw you."

He flinches involuntarily when she swings the bat down between his legs. For a split second he expects an impact, and his heart skips a beat—

"Say you understand! Say it!"

—and it is suddenly Neil standing over him with a bat full of nails, but it is Max too; like two images blending together. Neil won't hesitate to use it, though, Neil won't miss.

"I understand."

The room flickers before his eyes, like all the lights are dying, but he hears Max's voice ("*What?*") and Neil's voice ("*I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you*"), and he tries again to form words, to repeat himself before it's too late:

"I understand."

Then darkness swallows him whole.

After all that, he stays in his room the whole weekend.

Partly because of the beating Neil gave him when he finally stumbled

home in the middle of the night, without Max and without his car, and partly because he doesn't want to see anyone, least of all Max (who was home the next morning, eating cereal in front of the TV as if nothing had happened; his car back in the driveway as if it was never gone). He feels ... small, and humiliated, and angry and ashamed, and he doesn't want to deal with any of it.

He knows that he let things go too far with Harrington, no matter what weird things he was up to with those kids. Billy could have *killed* him, though, and isn't that a sobering thought? He's pretty sure he didn't, because when he woke up he was alone in that creepy house and there weren't any bodies there with him. Besides, if he had killed Harrington, surely he'd have been arrested by now.

He tells himself he doesn't care. Harrington was asking for it, trying to stop Billy from taking Max home like a responsible big brother. Getting in between Billy and Sinclair when Billy needed to impart an important lesson upon the kid. And Harrington threw the first punch, after all. So he had it coming.

Still, when Billy's lying awake at night because he's hurting from Neil's beating his mind wanders, and he imagines Harrington experiencing the same kind of pain from the beating Billy gave him, and—

He doesn't sleep very well.

Harrington isn't in school come Monday, and he tries not to let it get to him. He goes through the day like he always does, and tells those who dare point out his swollen lip that he got in a fight, and grins:

"You should see the other guy."

Neil usually avoids his face nowadays, except for slaps or the occasional backhand, but when Billy got home from the Byers' with a bloody nose he didn't have to be as careful. It's easy, covering up one beating with another, and Billy's almost glad that he doesn't have to make up a story to explain it away this time.

The first time Billy sees Harrington after the fight is on Wednesday. He spots him in the hallway and doesn't recognize him at first, because he's wearing a god-awful sweater and his face is–

Billy freezes and stares. Harrington's face is swollen, and bruised, and it reminds Billy of the way his own face looked in the mirror when Neil got to him, a couple of months before they moved here – the time when it occurred to him for the first time that Neil might actually kill him – and he is unable to tear his eyes away. Then someone comes up behind him and nudges him, and he sees a grin in the corner of his eye and hears someone say:

"So that's the other guy, huh? Shit, Hargrove."

And in that same moment Harrington turns and spots Billy standing there, and honest-to-god *recoils* – like a full-body flinch – before he turns away and hurries around a corner.

Billy feels like he's made of ice; he's cold and close to shattering. If this had been a few days ago, he'd have relished in causing that kind of reaction, but now all he can feel is a weight in his stomach because he himself has been flinching like that for years, and he realizes suddenly that he has never actually wanted to be the cause of that kind of a reaction in another person.

He did that.

He feels sick.

2. Flinching to Nodding

It continues like that; every time they happen to be in the same vicinity of each other, he can practically feel Harrington's apprehension. It's never a recoil, like that first time, but Billy knows better than anyone how fast one can learn to hide one's fear if the situation demands it, and he recognizes the signs in Harrington's reactions. He can see it in the way the other boy never meets his eyes, the way he avoids looking in Billy's direction altogether, and the way he clenches his jaw or tenses up as soon as he hears Billy's voice.

And it's strange, because it's not long ago that reactions like those used to make him feel good, and like he'd accomplished something. Now they only add to his own misery – and when he's miserable he lashes out.

He gets in more fights – both in and outside of school – and he talks back to his teachers and skips more classes than he used to. He gets detention a couple of times, which he skips, which leads to a phone call to his dad, which leads to a stern talking-to about the importance of school work and becoming a responsible adult.

Please, Billy thinks as he's working his jaw – Neil's grip was painful when he held him up against the door – *like school work's important*. He knows most of what they're doing now already, anyway. The upside of moving to a new school in the middle of fucking nowhere; he's read ahead.

And the thing is, that he's not entirely sure why this thing with Harrington is getting to him so much. It was just a fight, that *Harrington started*. Billy fucked up, sure, he never should have taken it that far – but he should have moved on by now. *It was just a fight*.

He doesn't want to think about the fact that every time he gets a reaction out of Harrington nowadays, he is reminded of *himself*, and he hates how he is able to ... *relate*, in a way, to the unease in the other boy's eyes.

Billy knows why Harrington tenses up and walks away when he hears

Billy's voice, because Billy has many years of experience of making himself scarce when he hears Neil speaking in a particular tone of voice. He recognizes why Harrington looks down and to the side when they meet in the hallways, because he can't even count the times he's tried to do the same thing at home; trying to be invincible to avoid attracting attention. He understands why Harrington won't meet his eyes, because sometimes when he meets his dad's eyes, it's taken as a challenge and lead to worse things.

He doesn't *want* to see himself in Harrington, though. It makes him uneasy, and that only makes him even more irritable.

One day he rounds a corner and they almost walk into each other. Billy's barely opened his mouth to tell the other person to *watch the fuck out* when Harrington looks up and spots him. His eyes widen and he snaps his teeth together so hard that Billy winces, and then he almost *jumps* out of the way and practically power-walks in the other direction.

Billy's looking after him, feeling cold, and goes home that day to pick a fight with Neil. It's Friday, he doesn't have school for two days. He can afford it, and his dad's fists feel like penance.

During basketball practice they mostly avoid each other, but one day, when the only marks left on Harrington's face are some yellow outlines of bruises and a scabbed-over cut, Billy *forgets* for a second and shoulders past him. Harrington falls to the floor, hard, and makes a sound that no one probably heard but Billy. It's the sound of air leaving the lungs, but it also sounds a little frightened to Billy's ears, a little like a *gasp*, and he stops. One look at Harrington, who is frozen on the floor and not making any move to get up, and he suddenly remembers himself straddling the other boy and hitting him, hitting him, *hitting him* ...

The memory – ironically enough – makes him want to hit someone, and *that* makes him gnash his teeth together to stop himself from ... screaming, maybe. Or throw up. Whatever this feeling is that tastes like bile and is stuck in his throat, clawing to get out.

Luckily for him, another boy tries to take advantage of him being distracted and take the ball from him, so he has an outlet.

"Hey, *fuck you!*" he growls and pushes the other boy to the floor.

Before he can do anything else, the coach blows his whistle and tell them to break it up. Billy throws the ball at the boy on the floor, hard, and advances, but the coach is there with his hands on Billy's shoulders, pushing him back.

"If you can't behave yourself, Hargrove, you have no place on my court."

Billy looks around at the faces of his teammates. A few of them are grinning, a few look annoyed, some look away. Harrington has gotten to his feet and is looking straight at Billy; looking *wary*.

"Fuck this shit!" he hears himself saying. "This is a fucking bullshit team anyway."

He turns his back on all of them – because he can't deal with it right now, and maybe the coach is right and he *doesn't* have a place there – and walks out.

He doesn't officially quit the team, but he doesn't goes back for any practices either. Fuck his grades.

He starts actively avoiding Harrington after that.

So actively, in fact, that he doesn't see Harrington for almost two weeks, except from a distance. And even then he makes sure that Harrington doesn't see him. He parks on the other side of the building, and when he spots Harrington in the hallway he turns around and walks the other way. It's not perfect, but it's all he can do; for Harrington, so he doesn't have to be afraid of him, and for himself, so he doesn't have to see Harrington's unease. The unease that makes *him* uneasy, and that he is the cause of.

But then one day, he walks out of a classroom and turns, and there – only an arm-length away – is Harrington, looking like a deer in

headlights at the sight of him. Billy's breath catches in his throat, and he abruptly turns on the spot, as if he had suddenly forgotten something – only, someone else is exiting the classroom he just got out of, and he finds himself walking straight into the door with a *smack*. He stumbles back and swears, hands flying to his nose.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry! Are you okay?"

The girl who opened the door on him has her hands on his shoulders, and while she is fussing and apologizing, he chances a look back at Harrington, half expecting him to be gone already. But Harrington is still there, and he's fighting back a smile. When he sees Billy looking at him, he wipes the smile off his face and hurries off, but Billy doesn't care. It was small, but it was a smile. Granted, it was because someone smashed his face in with a door, but it wasn't a flinch and it wasn't a gasp. Harrington *smiled*, and even though his nose is throbbing and the girl is frantically trying to drag him to the nurse's office to have it checked out, he feels something warm settle in his stomach. A *smile*, and *Billy put it there*.

He did that.

He feels strangely hopeful after the door incident, and stops avoiding Harrington to the same extent. If he sees him in the hallway or the parking lot, he doesn't walk away; he just makes sure not to make any sudden movements or loud noises. He scoffs at himself at times, because *Harrington is not a skittish fucking horse*, but he keeps it up.

Sometimes he looks at Harrington out of the corner of his eye and sees that he's still apprehensive, and there are still times when he'll go out of his way to avoid being in the same room as him, but – as Billy knows from experience – one can't just go around being afraid *all the time*. It takes way too much energy, which is better saved for actual danger. And after weeks of doing nothing threatening whatsoever in Harrington's presence, the other actually seems to relax a little.

The first time their eyes meet and Harrington doesn't flinch or immediately look away is one day when Billy's entering a classroom,

a couple of minutes too late, and Harrington looks up with the rest of the class.

The teacher sighs and says something – probably some kind of threat about detention, which seems to be the norm when he saunters in late these days – but Billy's not really listening, because Steve is *looking* at him. It's just a look to see who entered, sure, and he looks down when the others do, but there was no fear in his eyes.

Something uncurls in Billy's stomach and he grins at his teacher.

"Yeah, whatever you say."

He takes his seat in the loudest way possible, because he's Billy fucking Hargrove, and feels strangely at ease for the rest of the day.

A week or so later, after a few more encounters without a single flinch, he takes a chance and *nods* at Harrington when they pass each other in the hallway. It could have gone better.

Harrington is walking with some kid Billy doesn't know and hasn't bothered to learn the name of, and they're both carrying books so they're obviously on their way to class. Billy is maybe twenty steps away when Harrington looks up and spots Billy. Not knowing exactly what to do, and feeling a bit like he should have looked away before it got to this, Billy nods at him – both expecting and not expecting Harrington to nod back.

Harrington's eyes widen slightly, but he only turns to the kid beside him and continues talking, as if he didn't notice. Billy does nothing either, just keeps going, but he feels simultaneously rejected and angry at himself for expecting anything else.

Still, he tries it again, and the next time Harrington meets his eyes and nods back. It's *barely* a nod, more like an awkward twitch of the head, but it's not a flinch and it's not a blatant dismissal, so Billy counts it as a win.

3. Nodding to Smiling

He hasn't spoken much to Max since the night when she held a bat over him like a red-headed vengeful angel, and it's not like she seems to want to talk to him either. Still, it feels like a mutual decision, rather than just getting the silent treatment. It's just one more thing to deal with. Neil won't let Max go alone where she needs to go, like she wants to, and he makes Billy drop her off and pick her up, like Billy *doesn't* want to, so ... neither of them are getting their way. It's a small comfort, and helps make the silence between them bearable. At least they're both suffering.

He spots Harrington with the kids one evening, when he goes to pick up Max from the arcade. The other boy looks happy, and he's smiling and laughing with the little brats, who crowd around him when he ushers them into his car. Billy is suddenly grateful that he only has to drive *one* kid around, because he could hear them from inside his car when he was parked on the other side of the road, and he's also stricken by how care-free Harrington looks when he doesn't know that Billy is around. It makes his heart beat faster, and he bites his lip and remembers that small smile that he'd gotten out of Harrington when he walked into the door that day; the smile that he was the cause of, the one that was so small and insignificant compared to this joyful image.

He is interrupted in his thoughts by Max when she gets into the car and says something. He's not listening to her until he hears annoyance in her voice and tunes in in time to hear her say:

"Are you even listening to me?"

He glances over at her, makes sure she's buckled up, and looks away again.

"No", he answers and starts the car.

She huffs, frustrated, but he ignores her. She *did* say to leave her and her little friends alone, after all. Surely that means he doesn't have to listen to her drone on and on about them.

The memory of Harrington's grinning face won't leave him alone, though, and he tosses and turns for a long time before he falls asleep that night.

The next day, he waits by Harrington's car after school. He's smoking while he waits, and although he knows what he *should* do and what he *kinda wants* to do, he doesn't know how it will go, and he'll admit to himself that he's nervous. Smoking helps.

Harrington spots him immediately when he walks out of the school doors, and he stops walking and frowns. Billy holds his hands out and up, to indicate that he doesn't mean any harm, and *doesn't* grin his usual disarming smile – mainly because he's pretty sure it wouldn't work on Harrington. Instead he keeps his face neutral and his eyebrows raised, trying – and probably failing – to look as harmless as possible. Harrington hesitantly walks up to him, but stops a safe distance away. Smart guy.

Billy takes one last drag on his cigarette, drops it on the ground and steps on it. Licks his lips.

"Harrington."

Harrington looks wary.

"Hargrove."

Billy clears his throat, looks to the side.

"Listen, I'm ... I wanted to ..."

He bites his lip. *Fuck, this is hard.*

"I'm sorry, okay? For the ..." He takes a breath and looks up, indicates his own face with a little wave of his hand. "For the face thing."

Harrington doesn't speak, and Billy's *almost* grateful because that means he can continue his word vomit of an apology uninterrupted before he chickens out – but he also kind of hates Harrington for it, because he's awkward as fuck and he knows it.

"I was ... I ... Fuck it, I'm just sorry, all right. You didn't deserve that."

Harrington still doesn't speak or come any closer, and Billy suddenly realizes that he's standing right in front of Harrington's car – and that it could be interpreted as a threat, all things considered – so he backs up so that the other boy can get to the driver's seat without necessarily getting closer to him. And he knows he doesn't deserve forgiveness – even though he wants it for some reason, he *knows* that, okay – so he's trying hard to stomp down on his hopes. He tells himself that it's not about forgiveness; that it's about owning up to a mistake, and taking responsibility for his actions. *Respect, responsibility*; all that shit that Neil's on him about all the time.

Somehow he doesn't think that Neil would appreciate him using his teachings in this particular instance, though.

"You don't have to ... I know you won't ... *Fuck*. I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry. It doesn't help but." He shrugs. "Yeah. Anyway. Have a good one."

And he leaves, because he's a coward who apparently can't even form sentences.

And for a few days after that, he's back to avoiding Harrington, almost afraid of what will come after such a blatant show of ... weakness? Shit, what if Steve tells people about Billy trying to apologize? What if he tells them how Billy *failed at it*? He'll never live it down.

But no one comments on it or hints that they've found out, and the next time the two of them meet face to face, it's actually Harrington who nods first. And when Billy almost stumbles over his own feet, more than surprised, there is an actual twitch of Harrington's lips that shocks him out of it, and he nods back. They pass each other and the moment is over, but he feels ten feet tall because that was *almost* a smile. Almost. Smile-adjacent, at the very least, and that's without the involvement of any doors. And he doesn't know for sure if he was the cause of it, but he realizes that he *wishes* that he was.

He also realizes that those almost-smiles? He wants more of them.

He doesn't know how to approach Harrington again, though, because while he can charm the pants off just about any girl (and her mother) and talk shit with just about any guy if he so pleases, this is not a situation he's ever been in before. He doesn't even want to think about it too much, because admitting to himself that he maybe wants to get Harrington to smile more – Harrington being the cool-as-a-cucumber former King of Hawkins whose face Billy beat in a couple of months ago and whom he hasn't *really* spoken to since, not counting that cringe-inducingly awkward apology in the school parking lot – would lead to a bunch of other questions he doesn't really want the answer to. So he does what he does best, and shoves it away for later. Hopefully never.

The point is, that he's on unknown ground, and it's not something he's very fond of. He knows what he wants – even if he's not entirely sure *why* – and for once he doesn't know how to go about getting it.

He is therefore very much surprised when it's *Harrington* who approaches *him*.

It's at a party at someone's house, one Friday night, and most everyone seems to be there. He's been flirting and dancing and drinking enough to be pleasantly warm, and he's taken a break to go out for a smoke. It's cold outside, but he doesn't care. He's standing there, looking up at the sky with the ruckus of the party in the background, enjoying the chilly night air and the temporary calm, when someone comes up behind him. Billy glances over, and it's Harrington, who's not looking at him but instead lighting his own cigarette.

Harrington *must* have seen him – Billy shuffles his feet and exhales loudly to make his presence known in case the other boy missed him out there – but Harrington doesn't take any notice. Harrington is *ignoring him*, but he is definitely aware of Billy out there; they're standing within touching distance of each other, after all, and there's no one else there.

Half a minute passes, and Billy's forgotten about his own cigarette while watching Harrington, but eventually the alcohol in his bloodstream prompts him into breaking the silence:

"Uh ..."

Fucking eloquent, Hargrove.

Harrington still doesn't speak, or even acknowledge that Billy is there, and Billy feels jittery all of a sudden. He doesn't know what to do. Should he say something?

He decides not to, in the light of his recent failures with speech. Instead he re-lights his cigarette and goes back to watching the stars. He is loathed to admit it, but they shine brighter in Hawkins than they ever did back in California. *Probably because the lack of civilization*, he thinks, a little bitingly.

Eventually Harrington takes a deep breath, like he's psyching himself up to jumping off a cliff or something, and turns to Billy. Billy turns to him as well, preparing himself for whatever is about to happen – and is blindsided by Harrington suddenly backing him up against the wall, eyes alight with anger like that night at the Byers' house when Billy had threatened the Sinclair kid. Billy is so surprised by this sudden turn of events that he doesn't react until he's got a brick wall at his back and an angry Steve Harrington two inches from his face.

"Listen, Hargrove", Steve spits, and Billy can smell the alcohol on his breath, "You're a real piece of shit and what you did fucked me up for a long time, but you're not the worst thing out there, you know, and I can't go through every fucking second of every fucking day looking over my shoulder, so did you mean it when you said you were sorry?"

And Billy, ever so articulate, says:

"Uh, yeah. Sure."

Billy's heart is beating fast in his chest, because he's actually not that great with having people up in his face; his first instinct is to shove Steve away from him and maybe follow up with a punch, but at the same time he clearly remembers cracking his knuckles open on the

other boy's face a couple of months ago and he *really* doesn't want to do that again, so he keeps still with his hands at his sides and is barely breathing. Steve looks him in the eye – his eyes are slightly unfocused, *oh great he's drunk too* – before he nods once, as if confirming something, and backs off.

Billy stands with his back to the wall and runs a hand through his hair a little shakily while he fumbles for another smoke. Steve surprises him *again* by picking up the lighter he dropped earlier, and lighting his cigarette for him. Billy takes the lighter Steve holds out for him without a word, and then they both turn to look out into the darkness.

They stay out there for a couple of minutes, smoking in silence, and that's that.

During the following weeks, they share the occasional smoke during breaks in school; Harrington will come out through the doors when Billy is already standing there and just ... *not leave*, like he used to; or Billy will cautiously walk closer to a corner where Harrington is standing, and silently offer a cigarette or a light.

They talk very little at first, if at all. But when the smoke breaks during school hours expand to include a smoke after school and once outside the arcade when they were both waiting for the kids, well. Two guys can only stand in brooding silence together for so long – while sober – before it gets ridiculous, so eventually they start talking. Safe topics only, just everyday things, but it's more than Billy could have hoped for.

The first time Billy cracks a joke and Steve snorts at it, something blooms in his chest.

I did that.

It happens more often, after that.

A few weeks pass, and Steve starts to smile tentatively at the sight of

him (Billy has been smiling at the sight of Steve for a long time, by then).

4. Smiling to Relaxing

Then one day he drives into the school parking lot early, because Max had a project with her friends that she had to finish before school and Neil is home for the day and in a bad mood, so Billy felt it was safer to just be elsewhere. It's more than an hour until the school day starts, but still he finds Steve's car parked in its usual spot. Curious, he follows the footsteps in the newly fallen snow to the back entrance to the gym – which is open – and enters.

He finds Steve on the court; pale, tense and with bags under his eyes. He is half-heartedly dribbling a ball, but is wearing his normal clothes, with his jacket discarded on the benches. He looks a little ridiculous dribbling a ball wearing a striped sweater but he also looks half dead on his feet so Billy doesn't comment.

"Hey", Billy says, a little cautiously, and approaches. "What are you doing here so early?"

Steve shrugs.

"I could use the practice, I guess."

Billy can think of about fourteen different things he could say to that, without even trying, but they're all barbs or insults, so even though he's itching to open his mouth – because Steve served that one up to him on a silver platter – he doesn't. Because he's had enough sleepless nights that he knows how you look and feel after one, and he recognizes that maybe Steve isn't really up for it at the moment. He is also familiar with the feeling of having to *do* something; the restlessness and the need to *move*.

Or maybe he's just projecting?

Whatever. It's not like they're *friends*, it's not like he can just *ask*.

So he does what he can; shrugs out of his jacket and snags the ball from Steve's hands. At Steve's weak protest, he backs up a couple of steps and throws a shit-eating grin his way.

"Well, you're not gonna improve unless you're playing against someone *better*, Harrington."

Steve raises his eyebrows in disbelief and straightens up a little.

"I don't see anyone who fits that description around here, Hargrove."

Billy snorts, oddly delighted at the snarky reply, and throws the ball at Steve's chest. Steve catches it, and the game is on.

Fifty minutes later, they're both sweating and panting and sitting down on a bench, but Steve smiles and looks less tense, and Billy feels pleased and warm on the inside, because *he did that*.

He finds himself smiling too, and cover it up with a groan:

"Great, I didn't bring a change of clothes. Now I'll have to go through the rest of the day reeking."

Steve grins at him and quips:

"What else is new?"

"Fuck you", he says but it's without heat and Steve doesn't even look up (and it suddenly hits him how far they've come from flinching, and it's a good feeling).

"Whatever. No one forced you to play."

He scoffs, playfully.

"Have you ever known me for backing down, Harrington?"

He regrets his words instantly, because they sound like a challenge and they make him think of when he bashed Steve's face in, and if it makes *him* think about it, then Steve will probably also be reminded of it. But while the smile on Steve's face turns into something smaller and more contemplative, it's still a smile, and he gives a little nod and says:

"No. I guess not."

It felt good, to start the day with a game against Steve – even though he *did* have to go through the rest of the day with sweaty clothes. He felt more at ease that day than he had for a long time. Perhaps the memory of it is why he goes back there one evening a couple of days later.

Neil had been on him the moment he got home that day, for something or other, and it wouldn't have been more than a stern talking to if Billy hadn't snapped and talked back. He got a slap to the face for that and was shoved to the floor – hit the corner of the dresser on the way down – but instead of just lying there and taking whatever punishment Neil felt like dishing out, he'd gotten to his feet, pushed past Neil, grabbed his jacket as an after-thought and gotten out of the house, ignoring his dad's voice behind him.

He knew that he couldn't go home already, if he wanted to avoid a beating, but he didn't really have anywhere else to go. Had it been the weekend, he'd have found a party to go to, and maybe hooked up with someone or picked a fight to get the restlessness out of his body. But it's the middle of the week, so he finds himself back in the school parking lot at ten o'clock in the evening. The school is closed and locked up this late at night, of course – no janitor to open it in the morning, like a couple of days ago. But a back door to a school gym doesn't have the best lock – because honestly, who would even think of breaking into the gym? – and Billy can be creative if he wants something. And what he *doesn't* want is to sit in his fucking car all night, because it gets too cold when the engine's not running.

He's angry, and he's hurting, and he's currently taking it out on a basketball. Falling over the dresser hurt like a bitch, so he's having some trouble standing up straight, but he's nothing if not stubborn, and if he winces every time he jumps or raises his arm, there's no one there to see it.

Until suddenly, there is.

Billy spots movement in the corner of his eye and whirls around (*ow*), and there is Steve, standing by the door, watching him. It's too dark for Billy to see the look on his face, but Steve's voice sounds deceptively neutral when he says:

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

I could ask you the same thing, Billy wants to say, but doesn't, because that reminds him of the night in the Byers' house again, and he'd rather not think about that night for the rest of his life. So instead, he uses Steve's words from a few days ago against him:

"I could use the practice."

He smiles then, shark-like, because it's such a bullshit answer, and they both know it. Steve inclines his head as if to say *fair*, and takes a couple of steps closer. And there are a thousand things he could be saying right now, and Billy braces himself for the questions to come, but when Steve speaks it is the last thing Billy expected to hear:

"Wanna play?" he asks.

Billy exhales and feels some of the agitation leave him because *yes, he wants to play, that's exactly what he wants to do*. He nods, and Steve takes off his jacket.

They play until they're exhausted, and if Steve isn't playing as hard as usual to accommodate Billy's pace, Billy doesn't call him out on it – is a little grateful for it, in fact.

When Steve starts hinting that it's getting late and he should get going, Billy just shrugs and says:

"I think I'll stay a little longer."

And although Steve looks like he wants to comment, he doesn't. He leaves, and Billy stays; if he goes home he'll either have to face his dad or a locked door, and he'd rather postpone the former until the next day when Neil has had time to cool down.

He spends the night in the locker room, and it's not the worst night he's had.

His – friendship? or whatever it is he has with Steve – changes again, after that. Billy returns to basketball practice, and silences everyone who protests about it with a glare (except the coach. He actually

apologizes to the coach in private before class). Him and Steve greet each other in the hallways, they talk as usual when they meet, and sometimes they even actively seek out each other's company. They do not, however, talk about how Steve sometimes starts at loud noises – he never flinches at anything Billy does nowadays, though, for which Billy is grateful – and they don't talk about the few times in the shower when Billy has a new bruise, or the times when he comes to school moving a little stiffly. But there's this air of *knowing* between them – like they both know that something is off – and they don't know exactly what it is and they never mention it, but still do whatever they can to distract each other from it. And that is enough.

Billy drags Steve away from his gaggle of kids a couple of times, and even once from the Wheeler girl and her creepy boyfriend, because he notices Steve clenching his jaw and nervously moving his feet and *how does Steve's friends not notice?* So he rudely cuts into the conversation, ignores the glares the others send his way, and is either obnoxious (or frightening) enough that everyone but Steve decides to leave, or simply tells Steve to follow and walks off. (He figures that if Steve doesn't want to go, he won't, and if he wants Billy gone, he'll say so.)

But Steve follows, every time. When they get out of sight they have a smoke, or play ball, or just sit on the hood of Steve's car and don't talk a lot for a while, if it's not too cold out. Steve always look grateful and like he can breathe easier when Billy has dragged him off, so Billy keeps doing it. It almost gives Billy the same kind of relief to watch Steve visibly relax in his company; to know that that reaction? *He did that.*

Steve, in turn, drags Billy away from a couple of fights during the following weeks. Billy is still angry; still frustrated – he just doesn't take it out on Max anymore ... or on Steve, for that matter. But all that energy that's buzzing under his skin needs an outlet, so he's picking fights and he has never before backed down when someone else – with the noticeable exception of Neil – wants to go a round. But when Steve drags him off he follows because ... he doesn't really understand why. The fight always leaves him when he is alone with Steve, because he remembers Steve's face under his fists, and that makes him think of all the times it's been *his own* face under a pair of

fists and how that made him feel, so he swallows down on his anger because Steve doesn't deserve to have to deal with it. Again.

5. Relaxing to Comfortable Silences

Steve may not deserve his anger, but one time it gets really close. Neil told him to – not *asked*, Neil doesn't ever *ask* – be home for the weekend to keep an eye on Max, because he and Susan would be gone overnight. Max's eyes lit up at this:

"Then maybe I could have a sleepover with Jane? My friend, you know?"

It's a suggestion, but sounds more like a question, and although Susan looks like she's contemplating it, Neil doesn't even look up from his coffee cup. Billy already knows what the answer will be, but Max still looks hopeful.

"No", Neil says from where he's standing at the counter, and Max's face falls. "Not this time. I haven't met this friend of yours, and I don't know her parents."

Max frowns. "Mom's met her, and her dad's the Sheriff ..." and Susan nods a little.

Neil puts his coffee cup down and turns around to – no doubt – reinforce his *no*, and Billy doesn't know what it is that makes him do it, but he glances at Max and then turns to Susan and suggests, as if it's not a big deal:

"I could drive her there. And pick her up in the morning, and maybe make sure she eats something before she goes so that–"

He is silenced when Neil is suddenly in his face. Not touching, but Billy still finds himself backed up against the wall. Neil's eyes are hard, and everyone is quiet in the kitchen when he says, deceptively calm:

"I said no."

His eyes doesn't leave Billy's when he continues:

"We wouldn't want to inconvenience her parents on such short notice." *Do not defy me*, is what Billy hears.

"It's not an inconvenience, her dad said that we're welcome anytime!"

Billy almost groans, because *shut the hell up, Max, you're only making it worse*, and he can see Neil's eye twitch before he turns to Max, no doubt putting on an apologetic smile just for her.

"Still, these things should be planned beforehand. Not this time, Max. Billy will take care of you this weekend, and you will both stay in the house."

She looks disappointed, but leaves the kitchen after Neil pats her on the head. Susan goes after her, and Billy – who hasn't moved from the wall – is alone with his dad. *Making it worse*. Yeah, but when has that ever meant anything other than making it worse for *Billy*? Max is safe, after all. She's *Susan's* child. Billy, though – he is Neil's responsibility.

Neil takes a couple of steps closer and points a finger at him.

"You will take care of your sister this weekend, and you'll make sure she's not running off anywhere. Get it?"

Billy is too slow in answering, and gets a slap to the face for it. It's not a hard hit by any measure, but all he can think of is that the same hand that slapped him just patted Max on the head, and he has to swallow around the lump in his throat before he croaks out:

"Yes, sir."

Neil nods and turns around, as if that was the end of it. And honestly? It is. Neil has told him what he is expected to do, and he will do it, and no matter what he does or how much he tries he will never be good enough for his dad's affection.

So when he meets with Steve only a few hours later, on the parking lot behind the store on the outside of town, he is hoping that the other boy's presence will distract him from everything he is desperate not to think about, like usual. But it's like the slap from Neil burned his face; he can feel it on his skin, even though it barely hurt. It burns like fire; like the red of Max's hair. The hair that got an affectionate

pat, while Billy's face got hit.

He tries to shove it out of his mind, and think or something else, but he's short and gruff and Steve notices, because of course he does.

A part of Billy that isn't almost vibrating with something in between anger and despair is grateful that Steve at least isn't backing away from him – or leaving – when he's in this mood, but then Steve says:

"What's up, man? What crawled up your ass and died?"

And the reaction is an instinct, really, when he's feeling this way; to push people away, hurt them before they *find out* and get a chance to hurt him:

"Fuck you!" Billy says and shoves Steve – not very hard – but he sounds almost like he did before all of this happened, and it instantly makes him hate himself a little.

He wants to take it back before the words are even out of his mouth, and his hands tingle from where he pushed Steve back, but it's too late and he frowns. At himself, but Steve doesn't know that.

Steve's eyes go hard as he rights himself.

"Fuck you too, what the hell?!"

Shit. Steve is angry, and *Billy did that*. He wishes he hadn't; wishes he hadn't met Steve today, wishes that he'd had the sense to go somewhere else, get some other outlet for his anger. *He's fucked it up.*

Steve gets closer, looking furious.

"I was just asking a question, you asshole! You don't ... You don't get to do that to me anymore."

He puts his hand on Billy's chest and shoves him back a step. And Billy can't breathe. This is the second angry person he's had in his face in the last couple of hours, and it just makes sense that the only two people who gets in his face are the two people whom he can't fight back against. Billy backs up, eyes wide, but Steve follows, still fuming:

"You don't get to push me around, you don't get to *hurt me*."

The *again* is unspoken.

And it drives all the air out of his lungs. Here is Steve Harrington, whom Billy beat up only a couple of months ago, standing up to his own personal demon. Steve Harrington, with his eyes full of righteous anger, refusing to be pushed around; making a stand. Drawing a line. Planting his goddamn feet. Meanwhile Billy can't even stand up to his own dad; would never have the guts to say the things that Steve just said to him. Billy just *takes it*, and then takes it out on other people – people like Steve, who doesn't deserve it. Billy's throat is dry and the air taste like ash when he opens his mouth:

"Fuck", he murmurs, "I'm ... sorry, okay?"

For so many things. He makes a face, because he's not good at apologies, and tries to explain without giving anything away: "I was just ... fucking angry. Got into it with my dad earlier."

Shit.

"He wants me to stay in the whole weekend, looking after fucking Maxine."

Steve's jaw is still clenched, but he has backed up and dropped his shoulders, and Billy finds it easier to draw breath, and to pretend like the whole thing's not a big deal.

"And that would be so bad, *why* exactly?" Steve asks, annoyed. "Jesus, Hargrove, you're such an ass. Max's probably not all that happy to spend the weekend with you either, you know. You're not always the easiest person to deal with."

Steve falters, and he looks kind of like he regrets saying that last thing, but then he squares his shoulders and looks prepared for the fallout. There isn't one, though. Billy ignores the way the words cut into him, and takes his chance to return things to normal. *Their* normal, with the banter and the quips. He runs his tongue along the edges of his teeth and grins:

"What you do you mean? I'm a fucking delight."

And Steve, to Billy's great relief, snorts a little and rolls his eyes.

"Yeah, sure. You're the embodiment of pleasantness."

"Right?" Billy says, putting on an innocent face, complete with raised eyebrows and a pout. "Which is why I don't get why I have to babysit the whole weekend. There are ladies out there who need my company, Harrington. They *crave it*."

"Yeah", Steve says with dry amusement. "It must be so difficult for you. Your dad just doesn't understand the struggle you're going through."

At the mention of his dad, Billy's face darkens, because *Neil is the fucking struggle*. He covers it up with a smile that's all teeth, but he feels raw and anxious and *brittle*, and Steve probably picks up on it and misinterprets it as anger or annoyance, because he says, a little cautiously:

"Look, maybe it'd be easier if you ... played nice for a while? Like, with Max and your dad and stuff. Maybe he'd loosen up then. You know, if you didn't provoke them so much?"

And it's like a punch to the gut. For a moment he swears the world stops, and when the words fully register in his brain he has to fight against that damn lump in his throat for the second time that day, and he just –

He wants to scream. He wants to yell *What the fuck do you know?* and follow it up with a punch. He wants to hit someone, *hurt* someone, beat something to the ground. He feels the fire inside him flare up and mix with the heavy weight of despair, because *it's not fair*.

Or maybe it is. He has to remind himself that it makes sense. That he is a short-tempered, violent asshole who has made it known that he's not backing down for anything or anyone, and he's basically built his entire reputation on provoking people ever since he got here. He has never done anything to make anyone think differently. Why would Steve assume anything other than that Billy had provoked his dad, when Billy shows up angry like this and complains about mundane things? When Billy has only ever been provoking people and leering

at them when he gets under their skin. Why would Steve assume *anything else*, when Billy is such a fuck-up? Why would *anyone*? It's fucking true.

That doesn't make it hurt any less, though, to hear those words from him. Billy has to look away and blink a couple of times before he turns back to Steve, grins humorlessly – calling it a smile would be a stretch, judging from Steve's furrowed brow – and says, without thinking:

"I'd have to stop breathing to do that."

The joke-that-isn't-a-joke falls flat and he regrets his words for the second time in just a couple of minutes. He snaps his mouth shut and resolves to simply not say *anything else, ever again*, and turns his back on Steve to lean against a fence, looking through the alley and to the street beyond it. He doesn't want to look at Steve, in case the look in his eyes echoes the voice in Billy's head that says *you're a piece of shit*. He doesn't dare speak, because he'll just say the wrong thing or start a fight – *provoke* the other boy somehow. He wishes desperately for a cigarette, just to have something to do with his hands, but he left the pack in the car and he'd have to turn around and face Steve to get it.

Steve isn't speaking, and he's kind of hoping Steve will leave, but at the same time he's kind of hoping for *anything but that*, and he doesn't –

He doesn't know what to do.

A few seconds pass, then Steve steps up beside him and bumps his shoulder into his. He's not saying anything, but he's holding out a cigarette and it's like the peace offering that Billy wishes he'd had the guts to offer first. Billy takes it with hands that only shake a little, and when he glances over Steve looks a little confused – like there's something he can't make sense of. He's not looking at Billy, and Billy turns his eyes away, too. They stand there, not speaking, until they've finished their cigarettes.

It's the kind of silence that doesn't need to be filled with words. A soft, cotton-like silence that wraps around the two of them like a blanket. Billy wants to bury himself in it, and he finds himself with a

lump in his throat for the third time that day, but for a different reason entirely.

6. Comfortable Silences to Kisses

And then one day – it's a Sunday, and he's driven Max to the arcade with her little friends – he's got some time to kill, because he doesn't want to go home. He'd been at a party yesterday and gotten home late, and – being a little drunk and in a mood – he spewed some nasty words at Susan, who'd woken up and bumped into him in the kitchen. He went to bed without meeting her eyes after that, but barely slept, because *what if she told Neil?* It's probably safest to stay away from the house today, just in case. So now he's simultaneously thrumming with nervous energy and feeling worn-out from lack of sleep.

Steve's car drives up in front of the arcade as he's dropping off that curly-haired kid, and Steve looks up at the same time as Billy does, and they lock eyes. Steve looks as tired as Billy feels, and Billy acts on an impulse and mouths *Wanna play?* Steve hesitates, then shrugs and nods, so when the kids are out of sight they both turn their cars towards the school and park as close to the back entrance they can, out of sight of anyone coming down the road.

And it's only the two of them there, because it's a Sunday and no one sane goes to the school on the weekend if they can help it. They get out of their respective cars, and Steve is barely out of his car before he's talking:

"So what, you have a key or something? That's how you got in last time?"

Billy scoffs and levels Steve with a stare.

"Who would give *me* a key?"

Steve makes a vague gesture and looks a little sheepish. "I don't know. Coach?"

Billy only *looks* at him.

"Well, how did you get in last time, then?"

"Broke the lock", Billy says with a smug grin, but when he takes a look at the door his face falls. "But that's not happening this time. Fuck."

"What?"

Steve walks up behind him to see what he's looking at, and his shoulders slump. "Oh."

Not only is there a shiny new lock on the door, there is also a padlock the size of Billy's palm. They look at each other, and Steve raises an eyebrow.

"You can't get it open?"

Billy snorts.

"Nah, I left my bolt cutters at home, and I'm not using my car as a battering ram. If you volunteer *your* car, though ...?"

Steve laughs and gives him a gentle shove, and it soothes something in Billy – like Steve's laugh has done for a while, now.

"We could play outside?"

It's fucking cold, but playing would keep them warm for a while. Only –

"You bring a ball?"

Steve swears and throws his head back in exasperation. Billy finds himself disappointed that he's not going to be able to play against Steve, and in the silence between them he finds himself offering:

"I've got music though. In my car." He adds, pointedly: "*Good* music."

Because Harrington listens to some weird shit.

They've been listening to music together before, but always outside, leaning against their cars or a nearby wall for a shorter period of time. Never actually *in* the car, but it's too cold to just stand outside, so they climb into the Camaro and Billy pops a tape in the cassette

player and cracks a window so he can light a cigarette. Offers one to Steve, who takes it.

"Thanks."

They smoke in silence and listen to music – which is not as loud as Billy usually plays it, only enough to drown out his own thoughts and the breaths of the boy next to him – until Steve takes a deep drag, exhales loudly and glances over:

"You look like shit."

Billy glances back, raises his eyebrows. "So do you."

Steve makes a face, turns to look straight ahead again, and nods slightly.

"Fair. I feel like shit."

Billy snorts.

"Yeah", he says. "So do I."

And they turn slightly to glance at each other again, at the same time, and when their eyes meet Billy feels trapped, like he should *do* something. Before he has time to figure out what that would be, though, Steve is suddenly leaning over and kissing him – and Billy blanks out; his brain is malfunctioning and he's not moving or breathing because Steve's lips are on his and *Steve is kissing him!*

Seconds pass. Or maybe years.

Steve leans back in his seat and looks a little apprehensive, biting his lip nervously. Billy's eyes are drawn to that movement – to the lips that were *on his*, just now – and that makes him come online again, just as Steve musters up a half-smile and says:

"Please don't punch me in the face."

The *again* is implied. Steve sounds tired.

Billy doesn't trust himself to form a complete sentence at the

moment, because there are too many thoughts running through his head. He feels elated and terrified all at once, and that makes him want to fall back on what he knows; the all-familiar anger. But he *can't* be angry at Steve, he doesn't want to hurt him again – and he realizes, when he's still not speaking and Steve kind of slumps down in his seat, that he may have to actually *say something*. What comes out is:

"What."

Really eloquent, Billy, well done.

He's still frozen in place, hasn't moved since Steve's lips were on his ... And only because his eyes are still locked on Steve's lips does he catch the twitch that turns the sad smile into a kind of smirk.

Steve sounds less tired and more teasing when he says:

"Did I break you, Hargrove?"

And there's so much to be dealt with here – so many emotions at the same time, fighting for control – but Billy finds that he can't look away from that teasing grin. *Billy did that*. He's not entirely sure *how*, but he's certain that somehow, that smile on Steve's face is *his*. He finds himself licking his lips to chase the taste of Steve's lips on his own, and suddenly he just wants *more*, and –

They meet in the middle this time, and he hardly dares to believe it but yes, that's definitely Steve's tongue in his mouth. He is breathing in the air that Steve is breathing out, and he's warming up from the inside somehow, and it feels so strange but so *right*. And he doesn't dare touch Steve until he feels Steve's hands in his hair; then he carefully touches Steve's face with one hand. Steve makes a noise that makes Billy move his hand to the back of Steve's head and pull him closer, because he needs *more* of that; more of those noises, more of *Steve*.

Then Billy burns himself on his forgotten cigarette and swears into Steve's mouth.

He puts it out, shakes his hand to alleviate the sting of it, and look

over at Steve, who has put out his own cigarette and is now leaning back in his seat. Billy's hand is still on the back of Steve's neck and Steve's hand has fallen to Billy's shoulder and is playing with a lock of his hair, and they're both a little winded and staring at each other with wide eyes. None of them are saying anything until, suddenly, they both speak at once.

Billy says: "What ..."

And Steve says: "So ..."

They shut up at the same time, too, and then break into giggles, like a couple of schoolgirls.

And that's when Billy knows he's fucked, because watching Steve with his face scrunched up in genuine mirth, with his lips red from kissing and his ordinarily perfect hair a little tousled, makes him warmer than even the kiss.

Nothing else matters in this moment; not his weariness, not his lingering fear, not Neil, not the fact that Steve is a guy, not the fact that this makes Billy a faggot – none of it matters in the face of Steve fucking Harrington giggling in the front seat of his car, with his hand on Billy's shoulder. Steve is fucking *glowing*.

Billy thinks *I did that*, and it's the proudest moment of his life.

His next thought is *I want to do that again*, so he does. Bends in closer and ghosts his lips over Steve's, and he doesn't close his eyes so that he can see that even though Steve stops laughing, he is still smiling as he kisses back. It's softer this time, and when they lean back this time they don't lean all the way back, like they don't want to completely leave each other's space.

"So you're not gonna punch me", Steve says, still smiling, and Billy shakes his head.

"Never again", he vows. "I'm so sorry for that, I –"

Steve leans in and kisses him to shut him up, and that kiss says *I know* better than any words, and this is the happiest Billy has ever felt. The nervous energy that he's been dealing with since going to

bed yesterday is all gone, and all that's left is joy and exhilaration and a bit of exhaustion, because now all the tension he's been walking around with is gone and he can *feel it in his bones* that he didn't really sleep last night. Neither did Steve, apparently, because Billy catches him trying to stifle a yawn. He raises his eyebrows and puts on a fake-offended face.

"Am I boring you, Harrington?"

Steve has the decency to look embarrassed, and he rubs his thumb over Billy's cheek – Billy has the overwhelming urge to lean into his touch.

"No, not at all, I just ... Didn't sleep well last night."

"Relax, I'm kidding."

Steve smiles again, and Billy's heart feels too big for his chest.

"That is a good look on you, Hargrove", Steve says with a glint in his eyes.

"What?"

Steve's smirk goes back to teasing.

"Smiling. You should do it more often."

Billy's own grin widens, and he says with mock-offence:

"Hey! I smile!"

Steve leans his head on the side of the seat and his hand traces Billy's arm – feather-light touches that gives Billy goosebumps all over – until his fingers reach Billy's hand. Steve takes his hand in his, looks at it for a second before he looks up at Billy and says:

"Not like *that*."

So that's how they end up *holding hands* in the front seat of Billy's Camaro behind the school, on a Sunday, while they're waiting for it to be time to pick the kids up. Billy idly wishes they'd been in the

backseat, or at least somewhere where there wasn't so much distance between them, but they make do. Steve actually falls asleep for a while, and ends up half-leaned on Billy, and Billy watches him sleep in a detached sort of way and thinks *so this just happened*.

There is a voice in his head that sounds like Neil that says that this is *wrong*, that he is a *freak* and a *fag* and it'll *destroy* him – but Steve's face is peaceful when he sleeps and he looks anything but wrong. If this is so wrong, like the voice is saying, that means that Steve is wrong to, and – no. Just no. Steve is not wrong, Billy is at least sure of this. The voice is spewing bullshit.

Everything feels kind of like he's dreaming, and if this is what will ultimately destroy him, so fucking be it; it's better than anything he ever expected.

When it's time to pick the kids up he gently shakes Steve awake, and he looks adorable and sleep-muddled when he apologizes for drooling on him. Billy just smiles and kisses him to shut him up – because that's a thing he can do now, apparently – and then Steve leaves for his own car and they drive back to the arcade.

The feeling that this is somehow a dream doesn't leave him, but if it is, it's the best goddamn dream he's had and he doesn't want to wake up.

When the curly-haired kid has climbed into Steve's car and Max is on her way to the Camaro, Steve looks over to Billy and smiles again, and it's a smile that's just for him. *I did that* and *it's mine* thrums though Billy's veins, and he doesn't even bother with wiping his own grin off his face before Max sees.

She eyes him suspiciously when she opens the door and gets in.

"What's wrong with you?"

He just turns towards her and beams, not even saying anything, and she presses back against the car door like he's lost his mind.

"Buckle up", he sing-songs, and actually waits until she does so – still watching him as if he might explode at any time – before he revs the

engine and drives off; the tail lights of Steve's car still visible in his rearview mirror.

7. Kisses to More Than Kissing

The next day, Billy is almost certain that he must have imagined the whole thing. Lack of sleep, maybe, or perhaps Neil whacked him too hard over the head. No way did something that felt that good actually happen to Billy Hargrove. And even if it did – Steve would have had plenty of time to think it over since yesterday. Plenty of time to regret what happened. Steve's a smart guy, he'll have realized that Billy's no good for him.

So Billy steels himself for what is to come and resigns himself to pretend like nothing happened – because it *couldn't* have, or maybe it shouldn't have – but then Steve ambushes him and drags him into the boys' bathroom (which is thankfully empty) seconds before classes start, and all Billy's doubts evaporate when Steve kisses him. He kisses back, without thinking, and presses Steve up against the tiled wall.

When they break off, Steve is smirking.

"Missed me?"

Billy leans back, and it takes a second to get it into his head that this is *reality* now, so he licks his lips and watches Steve's eyes follow the movement.

"You're the one who dragged me in here, Harrington."

Steve surges forward and grazes Billy's bottom lip with his teeth, and Billy presses in closer.

"That's true", Steve says, right next to his ear. "Didn't want to give you time to freak out."

Billy doesn't want to admit, to himself or to Steve, that he wasn't really freaking out – just prepared himself for disappointment – so he takes a step back, runs his tongue over his teeth and levels Steve with a challenging stare.

"Who's freaking out? I'll have you know that I'm the *epitome* of calm

and collected."

And it's a filthy, filthy lie of course, which is why it makes Steve throw his head back and *guffaw*. It makes something bloom in Billy's chest, and he can't wrap his head around the fact that he hasn't been doing this all along. So many months in this place; wasted. To hell with his image, to hell with his reputation – as long as he can make Steve laugh like that, he doesn't care. It's a beautiful sound, better than anything Billy has ever heard.

"Yes", Steve says when his laugh has turned into chuckles. "So calm and collected. That's what you're known for around here. Calm King Billy."

"That's me", Billy nods, and leans in closer for another kiss.

Half a minute later he is able to convince himself to back away again, and clears his throat.

"We're gonna be late."

"See you in detention then", Steve says and winks – *winks*; that's Billy's move! – as he moves to open the door.

Billy shakes his head as he follows – the hallway is empty, because they are indeed late – and he lets some faux-disappointment into his voice.

"Am I corrupting you already, Harrington?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Hargrove. Didn't you hear? I was the resident bad boy until you rolled into town."

"Haven't seen any evidence of that until just now, though."

They banter on the way to their respective classes, and it feels so natural, like they've been doing this for years.

It hits Billy halfway through his first class of the day, that he probably *should* freak out just about now. The normal reaction to this kind of situation would surely be to freak out. Everything he's been taught and everything he's ever known is grounds for a freak-out of

epic proportions; yet when he thinks about it, all he can muster up is a warm feeling of ... disbelief, maybe. And gratitude.

It's new for him, but he's not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Billy has been through some shit, okay, and he's been an asshole for a long time. He thinks that maybe the universe has made a mistake – because he can't possibly deserve things like this – but not a lot in his life has been feeling this good lately, so he'll take this any way he can, for as long as he can.

And he doesn't even really know what this *is*, or what he can do to make it work, but he's sure as hell gonna try. The universe will have to pry it from his cold, dead hands.

During the following days, they continue like this; hang out as usual when people can see, and steal kisses and touches when people can't see. It makes school bearable, and almost like an adventure in itself; Billy hasn't skipped *once* since that Monday.

And he hadn't realized that this was what he wanted, but now that it has happened he can't understand how he went through the days without it, and the thing is that it *changes things*. It changes *him*, and he finds himself not really minding. He's still an ass, but he says things less to hurt now, and more to tease – most people haven't caught on yet, though – and he's still a hot-head, but Steve is always able to calm him down with a word, or a touch, or even just a look.

The situation in the Hargrove household hasn't changed, but Billy finds it easier to swallow his pride and just keep himself from talking back nowadays; finds it easier to take a shove or a slap or a biting comment when he has something good to look forward to. So when he's face to face with Neil and grits out a "Yes sir" or "No sir" between his teeth, he's thinking about Steve. The way he smiled from the other end of the hallway, or the way he ducked his head with a blush when Billy wagged his tongue at him from across the classroom, or how much Billy'd like to find out whether Steve is ticklish (because if he is, that would mean easy access to Steve's laughter).

And Steve isn't freaking out, either, which surprises Billy at the same time as it really *doesn't* surprise him – because Steve can be spazzy as

hell at times, but he's also got the air of someone who will not let the small things ruffle him. It's a good look on him, and Billy would be jealous if he didn't feel it rubbing off on him a little every time they're together.

Steve still comes to school tense, but that tension bleeds out of him the moment they find somewhere to be alone together.

They can't let anyone know about this. They haven't even discussed it, but they both know that what they have is *theirs* and theirs alone, and that it would be inviting trouble to let people know. So they pretend like nothing has changed when there are people around, and they try to find time to be alone; and when they are they kiss, and they touch, and it is so good.

The first time it goes further than kissing is at Steve's house. It's the second time Billy is there – the first time, he met with Steve's mother, which was a somewhat surreal experience as she invited him to have dinner with them and he didn't get a chance to decline. That evening found him at the table between Steve and his mother, eating what was probably supposed to be an exotic version of meatloaf and potatoes, trying to make conversation like normal people do while Steve was nudging him with his foot under the table. Billy would move his feet away, trying to pretend nothing was happening, but Steve's would end up touching him anyway, and Billy would forget what he was saying in the middle of a sentence or miss his mouth with his fork. Mrs Harrington probably thought he was a little ... odd. It didn't help that he caught Steve trying – and failing – to smother a smile several times during dinner. Billy mouthed *You're such an asshole* at him when Mrs Harrington took the plates out into the kitchen, and Steve just grinned at him.

But this time Steve is alone in the house. It's a Saturday and Billy is officially at a party – it's not like Neil will check, probably; as long as Billy is home when he's supposed to be and doesn't cause any trouble, Neil usually doesn't care – which means that he's really next to Steve in his living room sofa, with Steve's parents blessedly gone for the weekend.

They're watching a movie, although Billy isn't paying much attention

to the TV. Instead he's glancing over at where Steve is sitting next to him, wearing a yellow T-shirt and soft grey pants. Steve is barefoot, and Billy can't stop staring at his feet, for some reason. The urge to see if Steve is ticklish is strong, and he is contemplating just attacking the other boy to find out when Steve looks over.

"Why are you staring at my feet?"

Billy's eyes widen while Steve's narrow in suspicion, and there's really no good answer to give to that question, so Billy goes for denial:

"Uh. I'm not."

Steve isn't buying it; he sits up, plants his feet on the floor – there goes Billy's chance of testing his ticklish theory – and turns to face Billy.

"Dude. Are you, like, into feet ...?"

"What!? No! *What?!*"

Billy can't do anything but splutter, and the look on his face must be pure outrage, because Steve takes one look at his face and bursts into laughter. He laughs until there are tears in the corners of his eyes.

"Your face!" he eventually manages.

Billy levels him with a deadpan stare, which only makes Steve laugh even more, and to be honest Billy has to fight hard against the laugh that wants to bubble out of him, too. It's a fight he eventually loses, and it's a nice feeling, to have someone to laugh with. It gives him a warm sensation in his chest.

"You know", Steve stutters when he has calmed down some, and tries – and fails – to look serious, "there's nothing wrong with liking feet ..."

"Shut up!" Billy snaps and shoves Steve – who's back to laughing, *great* – down on the couch. "I don't like your stinking feet!"

And what, is Billy *five years old*? Never mind, Steve is laughing at him again; Billy's pride demands vengeance.

"For your *information*, I was thinking of testing a theory."

Steve settles in against the pillow and looks up at Billy, raises a challenging eyebrow.

"Oh yeah? What?"

Billy's smile turns wicked, and he leans over Steve.

"I was going to see if you were ... ticklish."

He attacks at the same time as Steve shrieks and tries to escape. He succeeds in rolling away, but ends up on the floor where Billy is on him, attacking his sides with his fingers – and look at that, Billy's theory was correct; Steve *is* ticklish. At least that's the conclusion Billy comes to from the way Steve is laughing and squirming under him.

"No no no nonoNO! Ah, Billy, Billy, stop, please, hahaha!"

It is, he realizes with a start, the first time Steve has used his first name. It makes the warmth in Billy's chest spread to his belly – and probably his cheeks too, judging from how warm they feel. Steve is an absolute *mess* who is gasping for breath and laughing on the floor, and Billy is filled with the now familiar almost proud feeling of *I did that*. And he will *continue* doing it, too, if it means that Steve will continue laughing.

Steve makes a last desperate attempt to get away, though, and grabs Billy's wrists and pushes them away from his body at the same time as he tries to kick him off. This results in Billy falling forward, catching himself on his elbows with his face almost touching Steve's, and with one of Steve's legs between his own and –

Oh. Okay. They're close.

"Theory confirmed", Billy says – it's most certainly not a squeak – and doesn't move.

Steve has stopped laughing, and the look on his face is not one Billy recognizes; curious, almost calculating. He licks his lips.

"Yeah. Wanna test another one?"

He's not waiting for a reply, only surges up and kisses Billy and this? Billy *knows* this, they've been doing this – but it's also something new, because of the positions they're in, and it is *intense*. Steve moves his leg, and Billy gasps.

"Steve ..."

Fuck it, they're *definitely* on a first name basis now. Steve moans into his mouth and *that's it*, Billy will never call Steve anything else ever again, if that's the sound he'll make when Billy uses his first name.

Then Steve's mouth is tracing his jaw and Billy swears breathlessly when he hears his earring clink against Steve's teeth. He feels Steve chuckle against him and sits up, dragging Steve with him.

And he wants to touch Steve so badly, but he doesn't know where to start. For the meantime he runs his hands through his hair – messing up that hair is one of his favorite things to do – and that's when Steve backs off a little, just enough to look him in the eyes. There's a question in his raised eyebrows, and he is tentatively reaching down but stops himself before he's actually touching.

"Is this okay ...?"

And Billy *yearns* for Steve's hands on him, for his own hands to touch Steve, to get *closer* to him, and there is disbelief in his voice when he manages:

"Okay? Are you *kidding* me? Fuck yes!"

And then Steve's hands are working on his pants, and Billy only has time to marvel at how brave Steve is to always take that first step, before Steve's hands are on him. Billy's breath catches in his throat and he stops thinking; just letting the sensations wash over him.

Afterwards, when he's left breathless with his back against the sofa, he is overcome with something that he can't put words to but that feels a little like gratitude and a lot like affection. His mouth is dry but he feels like he's underwater, like everything is slightly out of focus – except for Steve, who is looking at Billy as if Billy is

something ... valuable. Like he can't believe that Billy is really there.

Billy knows the feeling, knows that it's probably mirrored on his own face.

"Steve ...?"

"Yeah, Billy."

"Can I ...?"

Steve only nods, and Billy reaches down to reciprocate.

He watches Steve the whole time. Watches him close his eyes, bite his lip, open his mouth to gasp for breath. Watches his chest rising and falling with increasing frequency when he gets closer and his breathing quickens. Watches him throw his head back on a shuddering exhale when he can't hold back any longer.

Billy watches him the whole time, and he wishes he could make this moment last forever, because Steve is beautiful like this, and *Billy* did this to him, he made Steve feel good for once, *he did this*.

8. More Than Kissing to Talking

"Hargrove."

"Harrington."

They grin at each other when they cross paths in the hallway. If people find it strange that the two of them are talking and hanging out, at least they haven't said anything to Billy. Not that many people would have the guts to say something like that to his face, though. He makes a mental note to ask Steve if he's heard anything, at some point.

They don't use their first name in school. It's an unspoken agreement, but for Billy it's just too ... intimate. Steve is always Steve to him now, never just Harrington, but he doesn't want to let people know about it. Not to mention, it could get back to his dad, which ... wouldn't be good.

"Wanna hang after school?"

Billy's grin widens.

"Yeah, sure."

"See you in the parking lot, then."

It's what they do, nowadays. They meet by their respective cars, and talk and smoke and make further plans. Steve is often free to do whatever he wants, but sometimes he's promised to drive those kids around to places. Billy may have to drive Max home right away when school is out, and some days he has to wait around for her to finish whatever after-school activity she's into with her little herd of nerds. While waiting around for his step-sister was once something Billy absolutely detested, he finds that it's tolerable with Steve to keep him company. More than tolerable, even; he might even be grateful for the days when Max have plans after school.

There are no more fights at home about Billy having to drive Max around. If Max notices this, she doesn't say anything about it –

perhaps she, too, is grateful for the change.

Steve and Billy never do anything more intimate than share a cigarette now and then when they're in view of other people. When they're alone, though – Billy always long for the moments when they can be alone and actually *touch*.

In school, there aren't many chances; there are too many people around, and it's too risky. That hasn't stopped them from making out in the bathroom or – on one memorable occasion – in the showers after practice when everyone else had left, but they usually wait until after school is over.

They either drive to some deserted back road somewhere and stay in one of their cars, or they park somewhere and walk away a bit, especially if they have to pick up one of the kids later. But if Billy has the evening free, or can get away with staying out late, they're usually at Steve's house.

Steve's parents aren't home a lot – Billy has met Steve's mom a grand total of three times, and has only said a brief few words to Steve's father one late afternoon, when Billy was just leaving and met Mr Harrington at the door.

He mentions it to Steve, one Friday evening when Billy is allegedly at another party and thus will not be expected home until late (if at all):

"Your parents aren't around a lot, are they?"

For Billy, a parent-less home is a good home, so the question is innocent. But he can see Steve tense up where he's standing by the fridge, before he puts a smile on like a mask and turns around, offering Billy a Coke.

"I guess", he says. "They travel a lot for work."

And Billy's not stupid; he has worn that mask and smiled that smile – he knows the signs of someone not wanting to talk about something, and even though he's an asshole he usually respects that with Steve nowadays. But he's curious, so he can't help but push a little.

"You're lucky, man. All this space to yourself."

His words are casual, but he's watching Steve out of the corner of his eye, to see his reaction. He sees Steve's smile twitch on his lips, sees him tilt his head away, sees him frown for a second before the mask is back.

"Yeah. It's okay."

It sounds like something Steve's been telling himself rather than a response to what Billy said, and suddenly Billy wishes he'd kept his mouth shut. Steve is uncomfortable, and *Billy did that*. He puts down the Coke can on the counter without opening it and crowds Steve against the fridge.

"I'm especially thankful that they aren't home right now", he purrs and watches the mask on Steve's face crack with the beginnings of a grin.

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"Because then I wouldn't be able to do this."

And then Billy proceeds to make Steve's smile a little more real, and undo the discomfort that he caused.

If it's one thing that defines the relationship that he has with Steve, Billy thinks, it's the fact that they don't really talk about things. Sure, they talk all the time, about everything and nothing, but there are definitely things they don't talk about. They don't *have* to; there is an understanding between them even if they don't know details.

So when Steve asks, one time when his parents are home for the weekend, if maybe they can meet up at Billy's place instead, Billy just have to pause and lick his lips – contemplating how to say "hell no" in a way that won't offend – for Steve to drop the matter entirely.

Billy feels relieved and, in turn, never mentions Steve's parents again, unless Steve mentions them first.

They both have issues. That doesn't mean they have to talk about them.

And then he learns that Steve has nightmares and how he sometimes has trouble sleeping, which honestly explains a lot. Billy has spent the night at Steve's a couple of times now, often during the weekends when he can get away with it, and Steve has only fallen asleep before him once, so far. Every time when Billy wakes up, Steve is already awake and watching him, greeting him with a smile and a kiss, or a playful shove if Billy's been taking up too much space in bed.

Billy hasn't thought about it, really; he's always enjoyed sleeping in when he feels safe enough to do so, and when he's not at home he finds that he can relax enough to sleep until late. But sometimes in the mornings at the Harrington home, Steve looks like he's barely slept at all.

So when Steve's whimpers wakes Billy up one night, it kind of clicks. Not right away; it's in the middle of the night and Billy's head is heavy. He blinks into the darkness and realizes that he's not at home, he's in Steve's bed ... and Steve is—

He turns his head to the side. Steve is curled up beside him, back to him, and he's making small sounds of distress. It tugs at Billy's heart, so he reaches over and puts his hand on Steve's shoulder. Shakes him, gently.

And Steve flinches and gasps. Billy retracts his hand as if burned, and holds his breath.

"Steve?"

Steve's breathing is quick and heavy, as if he can't get enough air, and he has tensed up to the point where Billy doesn't dare try to touch him again.

"Steve. You awake?"

Steve snaps his head to the side and stares at Billy in the darkness. Billy has to fight not to fidget, because Steve's eyes are wide and terrified, and he doesn't blink for a long time.

"Are you awake? Hello?"

He moves his hand in front of Steve's eyes, and Steve finally blinks,

and frowns.

"Billy?"

Billy breathes out a sigh of relief.

"Yeah", he says. "You okay?"

Steve breathes out and blinks a couple of times in rapid succession, runs his hand over his face.

"*Shit*", he says.

"Nightmare?" Billy asks.

"Shit", Steve says again, hand covering eyes, and bites his lip.

Billy doesn't know what to do.

"Hey", he says, trying to sound soothing, "You wanna talk about it?"

He holds his breath until Steve shakes his head, and feels both relieved and strangely disappointed. He reaches for Steve's shoulder again, and Steve removes the hand over his eyes and looks over, but doesn't pull away.

"C'mere", Billy murmurs and tugs on Steve's T-shirt. Steve doesn't need more convincing; he crawls closer and end up with his forehead pressed against Billy's clavicle. Billy loops his arms around Steve's torso, one of Steve's hands rests on Billy's hip, and their legs are tangled together.

It takes a while for them to fall back asleep, but Billy fights to stay awake until Steve's breathing has evened out.

Steve doesn't want to talk about it the second time it happens, either, or the third (when he ends up on the other side of the room, panting and grasping around himself for something that isn't there), but Billy keeps asking.

Then Steve learns about Neil.

Billy has been really good at home lately – he's done what he's supposed to do, he hasn't talked back, he's made sure that he always has a believable excuse for going out. Still, Neil is Neil, and there are altercations. A slap here and a shove there – nothing that leaves marks – and it was only a matter of time before Billy fucked up enough to get a real beating.

It's after school, when Billy has taken Max home and is alone in the kitchen, putting together something that will pass as sandwiches for the two of them while listening to the music coming out of the open door to his room. His dad and Susan are going out tonight, and probably won't even make it home before that, so he's been charged with the responsibility to get himself and Max fed and to make sure she does her homework. No one said he had to stay in the house the whole evening though, and he's 110% sure Max won't mind him leaving her alone for a bit, so when Steve suggested, after basketball practice, that they'd meet up later, Billy was all for it.

He hears the door to Max's room open and close, and calls over his shoulder:

"Food's ready, you little shithead. If you're not out here in ten seconds I'm eating all of it."

He hears steps behind him and freezes, because he knows those footsteps, and they don't belong to Max. The hairs on his arms stand up before he even hears Neil's cold voice from behind him:

"What did you say?"

Swallowing, he stands up straight and turns around, meets his dad's cold stare for a second before averting his eyes – hopefully showing enough respect to avoid whatever's coming.

No such luck though. Neil walks closer, crowds Billy against the counter and narrows his eyes.

"What. Did you. Say?"

"Nothing", Billy says, regretting it immediately at Neil's dark look. "I

mean, I thought you were Max. Sorry, sir."

He's throwing in a *sir* entirely unprompted, hoping against hope that it will do the trick. To his surprise, Neil backs up a step.

"Where is your sister, Billy?"

And Billy feels like he's been shoved off a cliff. He recalls just a half-hour ago when he drove Max home – how he mentioned that Neil and Susan were going out, and heavily implied that he would be out, as well. How neither one of them really expected their parents to come home until late. How Max got quiet and disappeared into her room the minute they got home. How, of course, she must have snuck out to hang with her friends, as well, without telling him – because why would she tell Billy? Billy wouldn't be home, either.

And now Neil is home, and Max is not, and Billy realizes with sudden clarity that the question Neil just asked is a trap; there is no right way to answer this. He can't lie and say he drove Max somewhere, because he just called out for her, clearly believing she was home; and if he admits that he doesn't know, it's the same as admitting he didn't look out for her. It doesn't matter what he says, because it will end the same way. He is free-falling, and just waiting for the *splat* of impact.

So he says nothing.

He wishes he hadn't had his music on; if he hadn't, he would have heard Neil's car on the driveway. Would have heard the front door, probably. Would have heard Max sneak out, maybe.

He wishes for a lot of things, but right now the *one thing* he really wishes is that he'd kept a better eye on Max when they got home. If Max had been home, Neil would have lowered his voice and told Billy off for his language, maybe slapped him. But Max is not home, and Neil knows it. Knows that it's Billy's fault.

Billy braces himself, but still stumbles at the force of the slap that makes his cheek burn.

"I'm sorry", he says, out of reflex, and gets another slap for it.

"You were supposed to take your sister home after school."

Billy thinks *I did, it's not my fault she decided to leave*, but says nothing. He gets another slap, and grits his teeth against the humiliation of it all.

"Your sister is not home."

Yet another slap, and Billy makes the mistake of looking up and meeting Neil's eyes. Neil's hand is around his jaw in a second, squeezing painfully, pushing Billy's head back against a cupboard.

"And not only that, but when I walk in here I hear you using that foul language? You call your sister that a lot when Susan and I are not around, hm?"

Billy knows he's not required to answer; knows it'll only make it worse.

"I'm sorry", he says instead, swallowing hard.

Neil closes his eyes and inhales deeply, before he swings, lightning-fast. A closed fist hits Billy square in the jaw, and he goes down hard on one knee. Manages to catch himself on the counter and hang on while he's blinking the stars out of his eyes. He tastes blood in his mouth, and it shocks him into looking up at Neil, who has followed him as he fell.

He knows his eyes are wide; knows he looks surprised and maybe a little afraid. It's a *weekday*. He has *school* tomorrow. Neil usually shows more restraint when it comes to leaving marks on his face.

Not today, apparently, as he gets another fist to the face, just to the side of his left eye. His head snaps to the side and he narrowly avoids hitting the counter.

Shit shit shit, he thinks and raises his arms to protect his face. He knows it makes him look like a coward and that it'll make Neil even angrier, but he can't go to Steve's with marks on his face. He *can't*.

As expected, it enrages Neil even more. Billy gets a punch to the gut which drives all the air out of his lungs and leaves him gasping for

breath like a fish on land. It is followed by a knee to his chest, at which point he curls up on the floor and draws his legs up towards his elbows to try to make himself as small as possible. He knows that being on the floor means kicks, and he is proven right when he is kicked in the side, just under his left arm. He does *not* cry out, though it's a near thing.

"You're not calling your sister a shithead again, do you understand? And when I tell you to take her home after school, I expect you to make sure that she actually *gets home after school*. When I tell you to make sure she eats something, I mean *real food*. Are you following me so far? You've proved yourself to be a disappointment, but while you live under *my* roof you will at least *do as I say*. Am I making myself clear?"

During the whole spiel, the kicks keep coming. Billy's squirmed into the corner and is trying to keep his back to Neil (because kicks to his back hurts less, in the long run, than kicks to his chest or stomach), and he doesn't immediately understand that he was supposed to answer that last question until Neil has been quiet for a second too long. He feels Neil's hand gripping his hair and yanking his head back, and his heart is beating wildly in his chest when Neil gets too close to his face and hisses:

"*Am I making myself clear?*"

Another yank on his hair lets him know that he's too slow in answering, so he wets his lips (and probably gets blood on them) and says:

"Yes, sir."

Apparently satisfied with this, Neil stands back up and looks down on Billy, who's lying on his back with his hands slightly raised in preparation for ... whatever.

"Now, I have to pick up Susan for our dinner. Make sure that Max is back when we get home."

There's no *or else*, because there doesn't have to be. It's an order and a threat all in one; Billy knows what will happen if he fails.

Neil raises his eyebrows, and Billy belatedly realizes that he was supposed to confirm that he understood. A hard kick to his side (the right side, this time) makes him cry out, but he breathes through the sting of it and says, hurriedly:

"Yes, sir."

Neil nods, mollified for the time being, and turns and walks away. Billy stays unmoving on the floor, listens for Neil's footsteps to exit the house, listens for the front door to slam shut, for the car door, for the start of the engine, for Neil's car to pull away from the house. He doesn't relax until the only sounds in the house are Scorpions' *No one like you* still coming from his room, and his own jagged breathing.

The blood in his mouth was from him biting his cheek, and not any noticeable split skin, which is good. Still, he ends up with a bruise on his jaw, and a purplish mark under a slightly swollen eye. It'll probably go down in a couple of days, but they are visible marks that something has happened, and he won't be able to explain it away – not when he met Steve less than two hours ago.

There are bruises on his torso, too. A small one in his chest from that knee, one on each side of his torso – the one on the right will end up looking impressive, he thinks – and several on his back. His stomach is aching from the first punch, but at least it left no visible mark. He'll be sore for a while, but he'll live. He's had worse.

But the bruises. Steve will see them, and he will *know* something happened. Billy can't tell Steve what happened, because they don't *do that*. There are things they don't talk about, and they have both accepted it, but something tells Billy that Steve wouldn't just let this slide. He'd *ask*, and he'd want an answer, and that would *change* things. And Billy doesn't want change; he is happy the way things are – so, so happy – and he doesn't want to risk it, not for anything.

The smart thing to do would be to stay away from Steve for a few days, until he's healed up.

But. He needs to find Max, and Steve probably have the numbers to her friends. Also, he told Steve that he'd come over, and not showing

up would just worry him.

And most importantly, Billy doesn't really *want* to stay away from Steve.

So he goes there, anyway. After cleaning up in the kitchen, he grabs his jacket, his cigarettes and the keys to his car, and he drives over to the Harrington residence.

Steve opens the door grinning, going:

"Hey!"

His smile falters on his face, though, when he takes in the state Billy's in. Billy makes an effort to put on a smile of his own – and he can *feel* that it's not enough of one – and nods.

"Hey."

Steve opens his mouth to say something, and for once Billy really doesn't want to hear it, so he shoulders past the other boy and says:

"So, uh, do you know how to contact Max's little friends? She snuck out and I need to find her."

Steve shuts his mouth and then, as an afterthought, shuts the door behind Billy. He licks his lips.

"Yeah", he says. "Well, I have Dustin's number. And Mike's. I'm sure they have the others'."

Billy shrugs out of his jacket and turns to Steve. Tries to project an air of *it's okay* and *please don't ask*, and Steve – bless him – doesn't say anything else.

"Could you ... I don't know, call and see if she's there? Or ask them for the numbers, if she's not?"

Steve's eyes still haven't left Billy's face, but at this, he nods.

"Yeah, sure."

He bites his lip and walks over to the little table just outside the living room, where the phone is.

Billy walks into the kitchen and helps himself to a glass of water, while listening to Steve on the phone and trying to calm himself. Dustin is apparently not at home when Steve calls, but his mother has the numbers to all the boys and is happy to share them with Steve. Steve has to make small-talk for a few minutes to get them, but all in all it's a successful phone call.

Billy walks out into the hallway again when Steve makes his second call, and pretends that he doesn't notice the way Steve's face scrunches up when the person on the other end answers.

"Hi, mrs Wheeler, it's Steve ... Yeah, thanks, good, how about you? ... Err, that's good ... No, no actually I was wondering if maybe Max – Mike's friend – is at your place ...? Her brother, um, called and he's looking for her so ... No? Okay ... No, it's fine, I'll just call around. Thank you ... Yeah, no, I have to ... well, yeah, tell her I said hi. Thanks mrs Wheeler. Bye."

He exhales loudly when he hangs up, and looks up at Billy, who smirks at him.

"Sweet-talking the ex's mom, huh?"

"Yeah", Steve agrees and tries for levity: "The things I do for you, honestly."

And Billy gets a lump in his throat that he has to swallow to get rid of. Steve doesn't notice, as he's picking up the phone again.

And it turns out that Max is at Sinclair's house. Of course. The old Billy would be furious, but right now he's feeling empty and strung-out. For not being related, he and Max really are more alike than any of them would care to admit. Of course she snuck out to see her little boyfriend; Billy was going to the same fucking thing, after all.

Steve asks politely to talk to Max, and when Billy hears her voice on the other end he snatches the phone from Steve's hands and says:

"You should have told me you were going out."

There's silence on the other end. Max was obviously expecting Steve, but got Billy instead, and it must have confused her. But only for a second, because then she hisses:

"You wouldn't have let me."

Billy closes his eyes. He wants to yell at her, wants to blame her for what happened, but.

"I don't give a shit what you do with your free time. But you fucking *tell me* where you're going when I'm *responsible* for you."

He can feel himself getting angry again, but then there's a hand on his shoulder, and he stops himself. Takes a grounding breath. Says, in a somewhat calmer tone of voice:

"Did you eat?"

Another hand is on his other shoulder. Max hesitates before answering:

"I ... mrs Sinclair said I could eat dinner here."

Billy thinks of the sandwiches he made, that he threw away before he left. The hands on his shoulders move down, to lace themselves together on his chest.

"Okay. Will they give you a ride home?"

"... yeah?"

He can feel Steve against his back; Steve's breaths against his neck, and Steve's arms around his torso.

"Fine. Make sure you're home no later than eight thirty. I'm not kidding, *Maxine*. Eight thirty at the *latest*, do you understand?"

He lets his voice drop so it's more of a growl than actual speech, and Max hurries to answer:

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. Uhm ... thanks."

"Eight thirty", Billy says and hangs up the phone. Turns around and winds his own arms around Steve, buries his face in the crook of his neck and just breathes.

Neil told Billy to make sure Max was back when they got home. Neil never said anything about *Billy* having to be there. It's a risk, and it's tempting fate, but Billy really doesn't want to go home tonight. So he murmurs into Steve's shoulder:

"Can I stay here tonight?"

"Always", Steve says and takes a small step back.

Billy misses him instantly, but Steve's hands are still on his shoulders, and he just backs off enough to look him in the eyes.

"You okay?"

It's not what he wants to ask, Billy can tell, but he's grateful for the open question. That means he can nod and shrug and say "Yeah", even though what he means is *I will be, maybe, if I can just stay here with you.*

Later that evening, when he removes his shirt to lie down beside Steve, he feels almost shy. He knows how he looked before he left home, and he knows that the bruises has had a few hours to darken, so he can imagine what they probably look like now. Still, he doesn't have the energy to hide from Steve.

Steve, who saw Billy's unblemished skin in the shower this afternoon. Who knows that Billy went home with Max after school, and then came over. Who is probably drawing all kinds of conclusions right about now.

Billy turns around and doesn't meet Steve's eyes. Steve takes a couple of steps closer and slowly reaches out and touches the bruise on Billy's chest with gentle fingers.

"Billy, what ...?" he says, and he trails off. He swallows and tries again. "What happened?"

Billy shakes his head, and still doesn't look at Steve. He can't tell Steve about this; doesn't want to burden him with his shit. Doesn't want to rock the boat.

Steve's voice is quieter when he asks:

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He shakes his head again.

"Okay", Steve says and takes his hand, gently pulling him towards the bed. "Okay."

That night, when Steve has another nightmare, everything changes again.

Billy wakes up when Steve grips his wrist tight, and doesn't let go. Billy blinks a couple of times before he focuses on Steve, who is lying on his back, moving his head from side to side, and muttering *no no no no* under his breath. Steve's grip on Billy's wrist is *hard*, and he only holds on tighter when Billy tries to pull his hand away.

Billy grimaces. Steve is stronger than he looks.

"Hey, Steve. Come on, Stevie, wake up."

At the sound of Billy's voice, Steve's eyes snap open and he draws in a shuddering breath when he finds Billy next to him, but he doesn't let go of his wrist. Instead he draws it closer, and places Billy's hand on his own chest.

Billy can feel Steve's heartbeat under his ribcage. Can feel the sweat on his skin. He spreads his fingers out and places his palm over the other boy's heart in the hopes that it will help, somehow.

"You were having a nightmare", he says, voice low.

It's not a question, but Steve answers anyway.

"Yeah", he says, and then; "Shit."

"You wanna talk about it?"

He doesn't even have to think about asking, now. He's done it before, and the answer is always a shake of the head and Steve curling closer to him before they fall back asleep.

But this time, Steve doesn't shake his head. He doesn't say anything, actually, and that makes Billy look at him more closely. Steve is still on his back, with his covers thrown back. His hair is a mess, he is sweaty and pale in the low light coming from between the blinds, and he is staring up at the ceiling with unblinking eyes. He looks eerie, like he's not fully awake yet, and Billy feels shivers down his spine.

"Steve?" he prompts.

And then Steve starts talking. In a rough voice, raspy with the remnants of terror, he tells Billy about his nightmares. About how he's trapped underground, with people he care about, and how there are monsters coming from all directions – coming for them, and Steve can't run. Can't protect himself, or anyone else. The monsters get them, and they are torn apart, screaming and suffering. Sometimes, he dies first and leaves the others alone. Other times, he is left until last, and has to watch the others die – get ripped to shreds and *eaten*.

He tells Billy about how he is swimming, in a pool because he has never seen the ocean, but the sides of the pool disappears and there is just water on all sides. And then he's underwater, and there is no air, and there are vines snaking up around his ankles and pulling him deeper, deeper, and it's dark and cold and he can't breathe.

His breath hitches when he tells Billy about how he wakes up in an empty house, and walks downstairs and fixes himself breakfast, and all the food is ash. He looks outside and everything is dark and wrong and burned and *sticky*, so he closes all the doors and windows and stays inside. There is a knock on the door and when he opens it his parents are there, but their faces are full of teeth and they walk past him as though they can't see him. He runs upstairs and his room is gone, like it was never there; all the pictures of him are gone; and when he looks in the mirror he can barely make out himself because it's like he's see-through and fading away.

They lie together in bed as Steve talks, and it is such a strange feeling; like this itself is a dream. Steve's voice is almost monotone and he's not looking away from the ceiling. Billy's not looking away from Steve, and he hardly dares to breathe for fear that Steve will stop talking. That he will come to his senses and regret letting Billy in.

"I don't like being alone, anymore", Steve says, finally. "I feel ... safer, I guess, when I'm around people."

Around you, he doesn't say, but Billy hears it anyway.

And the old Billy would have used this information against Steve; mocked him for it and needled him about it constantly. *It's just nightmares*, he'd have thought. *It's not even real*. He feels sick just thinking about it. Because he can see how it's affecting Steve, and it feels like he's gotten an important piece of the puzzle that makes up Steve Harrington. Like now that he knows this, other puzzle pieces are falling into place. The things Billy has sensed about Steve makes more sense, now.

And the fact that Steve *trusts him* with this, and has once again taken the first step and opened up ... Billy feels humbled, and helpless, and protective. He is overcome with a feeling of wanting to give something *back*, but he doesn't know how or what—

—until Steve turns his head to look at him in the darkness, and reaches out a hand and runs two fingers over the bruise on his jaw. Steve looks haunted after speaking about his bad dreams, but his eyes are soft. Almost pleading.

"You want to talk about it?" Steve whispers.

And he understands.

Steve opened up so that Billy would feel safe enough to do the same. Showed his weakness, so that Billy would feel that he could show his. Billy gets it, and he wants to ... he wants to show that he appreciates that. That he trusts Steve, too. But it's hard, because he has never actually told *anyone*.

But he thinks that maybe he can tell Steve. In this soft bed, in the faint grey light from behind the blinds, in the middle of the night. He thinks that maybe this is a dream anyway, so what difference does it make? Maybe this doesn't even count. Maybe it'll be okay.

"My dad ..." he starts, and he doesn't recognize his own voice. "He can be ..."

He makes a face in the dark and shuts up, because if he doesn't he might start crying, and he's *not going to do that*. And that's when he feels Steve's hand on his face, turning it towards him. Their eyes meet in the dim light, their faces only inches away from each other, and he feels Steve's breath on his skin.

"Does he hit you?" Steve asks, softly.

Billy shivers, because even though all he really has to do is nod, this is the hardest thing he has ever done. In the end, he doesn't only nod. He says it out loud:

"Yeah." And his voice is shaky, but clear. "Sometimes."

And as soon as the words leave him, it's like he's all out of air. He sags against Steve, hides his face in the pillow, and feels Steve's arms around him, hands rubbing circles on his back. Distantly, he is aware of the bruises under Steve's hands, but all he can think about is how easy it was, in the end.

What Neil does, he has never admitted it to anyone; has always been too terrified and too ashamed to let anyone know. But with Steve – it just feels right. Steve shared his demons with Billy, and Billy shared his with Steve. They are equal, and on the same level.

They're lying in Steve's bed, emotionally raw, and Billy feels ... trusted, *trusting*, and safe. He hopes Steve feels the same way.

9. Morning interlude

That morning, Steve is still sleeping when Billy wakes up. It's the first time that happens, Billy realizes when he turns his head to the side and sees Steve's face pressed into the pillow. Steve's hair looks like bird's nest, his eyes are closed, his mouth is half open and he's drooling a little. He's the most beautiful thing Billy has ever seen, and suddenly his heart feels too big for his chest.

The light in the room has changed. Gone is the colourless light from the night; now there's early morning sunlight filtering in through the blinds, and he can see speckles of dust floating in the air where the sun hits them by the window. One ray of sunshine has reached the edge of the bed, and makes the toes of one of Steve's feet shine like gold.

Maybe he *is* into feet, after all?

Steve's sleeping soundly, with his face all relaxed. It warms Billy up from the inside to see him like this, especially considering the times he's seen Steve in the throes of a nightmare, and he finds himself smiling.

Smiling makes the bruise under his eye throb a little, and that reminds him of yesterday. The fight with his dad, coming here, listening to Steve talking about his nightmares, telling Steve about–

Shit.

He told Steve.

Steve knows.

He briefly considers fleeing, but his arm is under the pillow that Steve is lying on so that would surely wake him up. And he doesn't want to disturb Steve, not when he looks so peaceful.

And also; Steve looks *peaceful*. And he's lying in bed, next to Billy. He *knows*, but he's *still there*. He hasn't left, hasn't told Billy to leave, hasn't said anything to make Billy feel weak or useless or–

What did he expect would happen, though? Of course Steve wouldn't leave over this – it's not the kind of person he is. Steve has suspected for a while now, probably, and he opened up about his own nightmares so that Billy would open up about his. Steve ... *wanted* him to tell him about it. Billy has a hard time wrapping his head around it, but he knows it to be true. And it feels like such a weight off his chest, now, to realize that he doesn't have to hide this from the boy who's lying next to him in this soft bed, in this dusty room that feels more like home than the house where he lives.

For as long as he can remember, Billy has been hiding what's going on with Neil, and has been terrified of anyone finding out. And now, after telling the person who has quickly become so important to him, all he can think is *why*? Why was he so afraid of this?

Probably because he didn't have Steve in his life before. He didn't have anyone who cared about him like this – didn't have anyone whom he trusted enough *not* to hide it from.

Steve stirs. Sighs, stretches a little, and then blinks his eyes open.

Billy gives him a little smile. "Morning."

"Hey", Steve answers and gives Billy a smile of his own. "You woke up before me."

"Yeah, well", Billy shrugs, "some of us don't need quite as much beauty sleep."

Steve huffs, amused, and leans in for a kiss. When they break apart they stay close to each other, and Steve reaches up to run the back of his fingers against the bruises on Billy's face. Billy lets him.

"You okay?" he asks in a low voice.

And Billy knows what those words mean. They mean *Are you freaking out right now? Are you regretting telling me? Do you want to leave?*

He answers:

"Yeah. I'm fine."

And he knows that what Steve will hear is *No, I'm not freaking out. I don't regret it. I want to stay.* Because they know each other well enough to hear what the other is not saying. Even though actually talking about this stuff is apparently on the table now.

And even though the dreamy feeling of the night and the cover of the darkness is long gone, Billy wants to try it out. The *talking*. So he blurts out something he's been thinking for so long now, before he can change his mind:

"Fuck, Steve, you're so goddamn brave, you know?"

From the look on his face, that was not what Steve expected to hear. Billy looks away, and he is almost whispering when he continues:

"To always take the first step."

"What do you mean?" Steve answers, voice as low as Billy's.

"You know", Billy says. "You kissed me first. You touched me ... first. You ... last night, you ..."

"You apologized first", Steve interrupts. "You invited me into your car when no one was there to see us. You fucking pinned me underneath you while tickling me, man! I think we're pretty even on the first steps."

But Billy shakes his head. This is something he is sure of. He would have never dared to cross the lines that Steve did.

"No. That's not the same. You're way braver than I am."

A snort from Steve, and he can't help but look over.

"It's not bravery. It's just ... I've been through some shit, you know? And I realized that it doesn't matter, what people think or ... Or anything like that. A lot of stuff just isn't worth it. And then there are some things--"

Some people.

"--that *are* worth it. Worth fighting for, and ... I don't know. Potential

humiliation, I guess."

Not really knowing what to say after that, Billy *hmm*s. When Steve says it like that, it sounds so obvious. Here, in bed with him, it seems so *easy*; to not care about what other people think, to only hang on to the good things, to *not fight* all the time. But he knows that it's not that easy – he has gone through most of his life fighting everything and everyone, keeping his walls up to keep people from seeing the real him ... He's not even sure who that is, anymore. Maybe he has become the person he pretends to be? Or maybe he is the person he *can* be here, with Steve? Or maybe he is *nothing*, deep down, and has to create a whole new person, from scratch.

Steve did, maybe. He remember hearing stories about the person Steve used to be before Nancy Wheeler. He never believed them, because they are nothing like the Steve Harrington he has gotten to know, but maybe ... Maybe Steve created a new person to be. Does that mean that Billy can do the same? That he has a choice?

"This is too deep for this early in the morning", he grumbles, and Steve chuckles a little.

"Are you kidding? It's already late!"

"Yeah, for you maybe. Some of us don't need three hours to get ready for school."

"What, do you think this hair styles itself?"

Billy raises a pointed eyebrow at the brown mess that is atop Steve's head, and the other boy laughs and drags a hand through it to try to get it under control. Unsuccessfully, to Billy's great amusement.

"I don't usually sleep this late, thought", Steve confesses. "It's kinda nice."

"Is it because of your nightmares?"

Steve shakes his head.

"Not really, I mean, sometimes I don't remember what I dream. Sometimes I just wake up and can't go back to sleep. The nightmares

aren't ... it's not like I have them every night or anything. Sometimes it's just really weird dreams."

He hesitates before he continues:

"I dreamt about you a couple of times. The night at the Byers'."

Billy's heart goes cold, and his eyes widen. He has seen firsthand how the nightmares affect Steve, and he hates the thought of him being the cause of one of them. He remembers Steve shooting up in bed, sweaty and disoriented, gasping for breath, and he thinks *I did that*.

"Shit", he says and scoots up on one elbow to be able to look Steve in the eye properly. "Steve, you know I'm sorry, right? Like, I'm so fucking sorry for that night, that I hurt you. I'm—"

"I know."

But Billy won't let him interrupt. He continues, almost frantically:

"No, you *don't* know. When I got here you were just ... ignoring me, you know, and I *hated* it. It was driving me crazy. I just wanted you to ... I don't know, notice me or something. And that night, I ... My dad was on me about bringing Max home, and you were *there* and it just ... Fuck, it all got out of hand. I'm so sorry. I wish ... I wish I could go back and undo it."

And it's probably the most heartfelt apology Billy has given in his life, because it's *important* that Steve understands how much Billy regrets doing what he did that night, because *Steve* is important.

Steve looks a little overwhelmed, but then his face transforms, and he looks at Billy with narrowed eyes and a sly smile:

"So you're telling me ... that when you were giving me so much shit back then, you were actually pulling my pigtails?"

Billy splutters. "What?! No!"

But he feels the realization sink in that yeah, that's probably *exactly* what he was doing. *Fuck*. With that understanding, he can feel the heat rising in his cheeks. He tries to roll over in bed to hide his face,

but Steve's hand shoots out to stop him. Steve looks positively gleeful when he chirps:

"You totally were! All those comments, and the shoves and – *oh my god*, you were *always* on me during practice! Oh my god, this is so precious!"

Billy closes his eyes and shakes his head in denial, even though he knows he's blushing.

"You're precious."

Oh, great comeback, Hargrove.

"I know I am", Steve says, and Billy can hear the grin in his voice. "Precious and *awesome*."

Billy can feel Steve's fingers carding through his hair, and he glances up and meets his eyes while simultaneously trying to smother himself in the pillow. Steve's gaze softens, and he gently drags his thumb over Billy's cheek.

"Then again", he says, "so are you."

And okay, they may have opened up to each other and they may be able to actually talk about all the stuff they didn't talk about before, now, and this may be a big step for the both of them – but Billy is *blushing* and they haven't even gotten out of bed. This has to stop.

"Shut up, Harrington. It's too early for this kinda mushy crap."

He tries to sound serious, but fails. Steve laughs at him and ruffles his hair *just to be an ass*, before rolling out of bed and stretching.

"Fine!" he says. "Breakfast before school?"

"Breakfast", Billy confirms and sits up.

He is pulling on his jeans when he looks up and sees Steve by his closet, digging for a shirt, and he pauses.

"Hey Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

And Steve doesn't ask *for what*, because he knows what Billy means.

10. Talking to Laughing

Eventually, though, someone finds out. And in retrospect, it's really no surprise that that someone is Dustin, the kid that Steve is so fond of. Billy has heard a lot about him through Steve, and although he doesn't really concern himself with the kids any more than taking extra care not to run them over with his car nowadays, he knows that they are important to Steve. And Dustin, whom Steve has spent a lot of time driving around town these last few months, is apparently somewhat of a favorite, even though Steve vehemently denies having favorites.

It's an accident, of course. It's not like they planned for anyone to find out.

It happens on a lazy Sunday afternoon in late April when the sun is out, the sky is blue, and there is spring in the air. Billy is over at Steve's place, because Steve's parents left for a business trip earlier that morning, and Neil and Susan have been out of town for the weekend and aren't due home until late that night. Max was happy to spend the day at Sinclair's house, and Billy doesn't have to pick her up until after dinner. It's two o'clock in the afternoon, and Billy and Steve are sharing a pool chair out by the pool, enjoying the almost-warmth.

Yesterday was an equally lovely day, which is why Steve's dad made him fill up the pool.

"He said we might as well", Steve explained and deepened his voice to imitate his dad. "Summer will be here before you know it."

And while it's still too early in the season to go swimming, and Billy *told* Steve this, the chair is placed just by the edge of the pool because Billy is enjoying the way the sunlight glitters on the surface of the water, and how it hits Steve's face. It makes the other boy look otherworldly.

They are alone in the backyard, they're both in a good mood, and may be getting a little handsy with each other. Billy is straddling Steve and holding his face while peppering him with kisses, and

Steve is half-heartedly trying to shove him off so he can get into Billy's pants. It's not warm enough outside yet for them to be shirtless, but one of Steve's hands finds its way under Billy's shirt, and the sensations of Steve's fingers against his skin makes him growl low in his throat.

And in that moment, several things happen at once: Steve's eyes widen comically as he's looking over Billy's shoulder; something hits Billy on the side of the head which takes him by surprise and knocks him off Steve and the chair; and a voice shrieks:

"Get the hell off him, you *asshole*!"

Billy hits the water with a splash – the heating is not on yet so it's *fucking cold* – and the shock of it makes him inhale, so when he's finally found the bottom of the pool with his feet and reached the surface, he's gasping for breath and hacking up a lung. His hair is in wet tendrils over his eyes and he can't see anything, so he fumbles with his hands until he finds the edge of the pool – coughing the entire time – and only then does he shake his hair out of his eyes to see what the hell is going on. He hears:

"Stay away from him!"

And, simultaneously:

"No, Dustin, don't–"

And then he's hit over the head again, with something hard, and he loses his grip on the edge of the pool and goes under again.

This time, when he emerges from the water, he holds his hands up to protect himself from any future attacks. His first words when he's spit out the water in his mouth are:

"Ow, what the *fuck*?!"

He is hit again, but grabs whatever it is and yanks at it to get it away from whoever's holding it, and looks up.

At the edge of the pool stands little Dustin Henderson, trying to pull a *fucking leaf skimmer* out of Billy's grasp. The look on Henderson's face

can only be described as *fierce*, and he's keeping himself between the pool and Steve, who is trying to get up from the ground on the other side of the overturned chair – and *how did he end up there?* Henderson shakes the telescopic pole holding the leaf skimmer and changes tactics – uses it to push Billy away from the edge instead of trying to pull it free – and turns to yell at Steve:

"Run, Steve!"

And the situation is just so surreal that Billy lets himself be pushed off the edge. The pool is not deep in this end, so he simply takes a few steps back in the water so the kid won't reach him with his make-shift weapon, and watches Steve without a word. Steve, who has gotten to his feet, meets his eyes ... and there are really no words for what has just happened, so they just stare at each other with wide eyes.

The kid hasn't run out of words, though. He pulls the skimmer back and holds it up threateningly like it's a bat, and chances a look behind him to see that Steve hasn't moved, and yells:

"Run, Steve, go call Hopper or something!"

"Jesus Christ", Billy mutters when Steve *finally* reaches out and places a hand on Henderson's shoulder. The kid whirls around and tries to push Steve away, but Steve looks between him and Billy and opens his mouth to say something–

–and then his face crumbles and he breaks down in giggles, the *fucker*.

The look on Henderson's face match Billy's, as they're both staring at Steve like he's finally cracked. This makes Steve laugh harder, and soon he's howling with laughter and has to right the pool chair so he can sit down. Billy rolls his eyes and heaves himself up out of the pool – to Henderson's horror, judging from the look on his face – and mutters:

"Yeah, fucking *laugh it up*, Harrington. *Hilarious*."

"It is!" Steve manages to wheeze out, and he has actual *tears of mirth*

running down his face. Had this been in any other situation, Billy would enjoy the scene immensely, but he's drenched and cold and he just got hit on the head – *twice* – so he's not in a laughing mood. Neither, it seems, is Henderson, who pipes up:

"What's going on? Why aren't you running? Steve, what's *going on*?"

And the chill of the water is suddenly nothing compared to the cold that washes over Billy when it hits him that this kid *saw them*. He saw them on the chair *together*, and Billy's first – and slightly hysteric – thought is that now he'll have to kill the kid, and his second is to just kill *himself*, because if this gets out it might get back to his dad and then Billy's *dead anyway*. They could have played it off as some kind of rivalry thing, maybe, but it's too late now because Steve is still *laughing* and–

He stares at Steve with horror (so does the kid) and eventually Steve's laughter turns to giggles, which turns to an occasional chuckle, which turns to him finally clearing his throat and trying to look serious. He watches the both of them and breaks out into a smile.

"Jesus, guys", is what he says. "Chill."

Chill?! Steve wants him to chill when this kid knows about them and Billy's going to die at the hands of his own father?! He doesn't say this out loud, but the kid have no reservations against voicing his thoughts:

"What the hell, Steve? That asshole is attacking you and you're telling me to *chill*?"

"Does it look like I was attacking him, kid?" Billy snarls without thinking, and only then realizes that *shit*, he probably should have pretended that he was.

Steve looks at Billy, and asks his permission with a raise of his eyebrows. Billy is busy berating himself for *not fucking thinking*, so he doesn't react at first. Steve gives him a look that means *Trust me*, and Billy shrugs. Yeah, sure, he'll trust Steve. Trust him to get them both killed. At least they'll go together, probably.

"He wasn't attacking me, Dustin."

The kid stares at Billy, then at Steve again, then back at Billy.

"Then what—?"

Jesus, how dumb is this kid?

"You don't have to worry. He was not doing anything against my will, I promise."

Henderson's eyes narrow, and his mouth falls open while he thinks, and apparently the kid is not dumb *enough*, because Billy can see when it clicks. Dustin's whole face transforms into a mask of absolute horror.

"Oh my god!" he wails and takes a dramatic step backwards, clutching at his heart. "Oh my god, you were ... Are you telling me he was ... he was all over you and you *let him?*!"

The kid's voice reaches a note so high that Billy winces, both over the words themselves and the pitch of them. And okay, Billy is a little offended that anyone would actually think that he'd attack Harrington now, but this reaction is somehow even more insulting, so he flicks the water off his hands at the kid in retaliation. The kid straightens up and glares at him, and he glares right back. Steve snorts at them both, and tries to smooth things out when they turn to him with identical glares:

"How about we take this inside, guys?"

And the sun is warm but the breeze is not, especially when you've been drenched in an un-heated pool in the end of April, so *inside* sounds like a plan to Billy. He shoulders past Steve and walks into the house, and doesn't care that he's leaving puddles on the floor behind him all the way into the kitchen. A minute later, Steve enters from the hallway with the kid trailing behind him. Steve's holding a towel, which he throws at Billy's face. Billy catches it and begins drying off his hair, while Steve ushers Dustin over to a chair and places a candy bar in his hands.

"Candy, Steve? You think candy's gonna help when I find out that one

of my best friends is ... *dating a maniac?!'*

Steve freezes by the table, Billy stops drying his hair by the counter, and Henderson looks like he regrets opening his mouth – at least until he tears open the wrapper and takes a big bite out of the candy bar, chewing like he has something to prove.

"Are you dating?" he says, with his mouth full, pinning Steve under a frankly impressive stare.

Steve looks over to Billy, who shrugs. This is probably Steve's fault somehow; Steve can sort it out.

"Uh, kind of?" Steve settles on. "But Dustin, you can't tell anyone!"

Henderson whines, and slumps down in his seat.

"Steve, come ooon, I can't keep this from The Party, this is the biggest thing to happen in years!"

Steve opens his mouth to say something, but Henderson gives him a significant look and repeats:

"In *years*, Steve, I know what I'm saying!"

"Please", Steve says and crouches by the chair so he's at the kid's level. "You can't tell them. No one can find out. Please, Dustin, it's important to me."

Good thing he didn't say *to us*, Billy thinks, because then the kid would definitely blab. As it is, he can see Henderson's resolve wither under Steve's earnest stare, and he hates that he can relate. He, too, can never say no to Steve when he turns those big doe eyes on him.

"Ugh, *fine*", the kid says and makes it sound like he's making a huge sacrifice. "But this will cost you so many candy bars."

He holds up the empty wrapper and shakes it in front of Steve's face.

"*So many candy bars, Steve.*"

Steve smiles, stands up and ruffles his hair, and Henderson turns his

attention to Billy:

"And you, y- *oh my god why are you taking off your clothes?!*"

Billy, who has already kicked off his shoes, peels off his shirt and throws it with a wet *smack* onto the kitchen counter before he answers:

"Because you pushed me into a freezing pool, kid. After hitting me in the head, I might add. *Twice.*"

"Oh, so you're *concussed*, is that why you're getting naked in the kitchen in front of a child?!"

Billy is equal parts impressed and annoyed with the kid's sass, but Steve, who initially bit his lip and looked like he was fighting laughter, actually frowns at the mere mention of a potential concussion. He comes up to Billy and reaches up with his hands for Billy's scalp.

"You okay?" he asks, softly, and turns Billy's head so he can look for possible injury.

Billy pins him with a look.

"It was a *leaf skimmer*, Steve. Wielded by a ten-year-old."

They both ignore Henderson's indignant squawk of *I'm not ten!* and Steve runs a hand through Billy's wet hair, undoubtedly feeling for bumps. Billy gently pushes him away and huffs:

"I'm fine! Hands off the hair!"

"You better be", Steve mutters, and it warms Billy up enough to crack a small smile.

The sudden silence coming from the kitchen table makes both of them look over at the same time, and they find Henderson staring at them as if they'd suddenly started tap dancing right there in the kitchen. He says:

"Son of a bitch. This is so weird. *So weird.* And I've seen some weird

stuff."

Before any of them can react to this, his face goes through an array of different emotions in, like, a second, and he looks like he's going to be sick.

"Wait wait wait", he says, "do you guys ... kiss and stuff? Because ew! No, don't answer that, I don't want to know. *Ew ew ew*, forget I said anything."

And Billy, who has finally started to realize that maybe this doesn't mean that he will die, can't help himself. He leans over and licks Steve's face, and when Steve jerks back in surprise and the kid *howls* and scrubs at his eyes, he leans back with a satisfied smirk.

"Don't traumatize the kid, Billy", Steve mutters, but he's fighting a smile.

"So, what?" Henderson yells when he's done being a little drama queen, "You almost killed Steve last year and now you're like, *together-together?! It doesn't make any sense!*"

Billy's still not talking; the kid is Steve's friend, after all.

"We ... made up", Steve says and shrugs.

Henderson honest-to-god *shudders*.

"That means you *kissed* and made up. That's so disgusting."

Something cold and sharp stabs Billy in the stomach at those words, and Steve winces a little before he throws his hands up, glances over at Billy and furrows his brow. "Come on, Dustin!"

"What?" the kid says.

"Don't be mean!"

"*What did I say?!* "

Steve flails a little and opens his mouth as if to say something, but nothing comes out. He looks a little anxious, and Billy wants to reach

out for him. He actually begins to do so before he stops himself. The kid notices, and look from Billy to Steve until he seems to realize how what he said must have sounded; then he rolls his whole head – not his eyes, he rolls *his entire head* in an overly-dramatic way – and groans:

"Whatever, Steve, I don't care that you're *guys*, I care that *he's* an asshole!"

And Billy – strangely relieved at hearing this – can't even be mad, because it's true. Meanwhile, Henderson's eyes have softened when Steve is pinning him with a pleading look – it seems that a soft spot for Steve Harrington is what Billy and the Henderson kid have in common – and he sighs.

"Fine, I'm sorry. I'll keep your little secret. But you–"

And he turns to Billy and scowls.

"If you ever hurt Steve again, I'll know. I know some pretty scary people, and we'll come for you. And also I know where Steve keeps his bat."

Billy almost smiles. Almost. It's a peace offering wrapped in a paper-thin threat, but he'll take it. He's also starting to realize that this kid is *protective* of Steve. It is definitely something he can relate to, so he nods solemnly at him (but looks at Steve) when he promises:

"I won't hurt him again."

Steve smiles at the two of them, and it's a brilliant smile that's a little bit Billy's and a little bit something else, but he's happy to have put it on Steve's face. Then Steve has to ruin the moment by commenting:

"You won't hurt me, Hargrove, because we both know I can kick your ass."

And Billy laughs at that, loud and heartily, because on the one hand it's a blatant lie – Steve wouldn't have a chance against him if he really wanted to hurt him, and they both know it – and on the other hand it's the most truthful thing to have ever been uttered; because he won't hurt Steve ever again, no matter what, and even if Steve

went for him with the aforementioned bat, Billy wouldn't lift a finger to stop him – and isn't that a scary thought?

So he's standing in Steve's kitchen, wearing only soaked-through jeans and a towel wrapped around his neck, and he's laughing like he can't remember ever laughing before.

"You made him laugh, Steve", Henderson says, warily. "He's *laughing*. This is freaky. Steve. Why is he laughing? *Steve?*"

The disbelief in the kid's voice makes him laugh even more, enough to pull Steve into it with him. They are laughing together, eventually leaning on each other to stay upright, while Dustin Henderson watches them like they're insane. And the feeling in his chest can't be described as anything but love. Love for Steve, who forgave him, who is always there for him and who makes him laugh.

He's laughing until his stomach aches and his cheeks hurt, and it's so *good*.

And Steve did that.